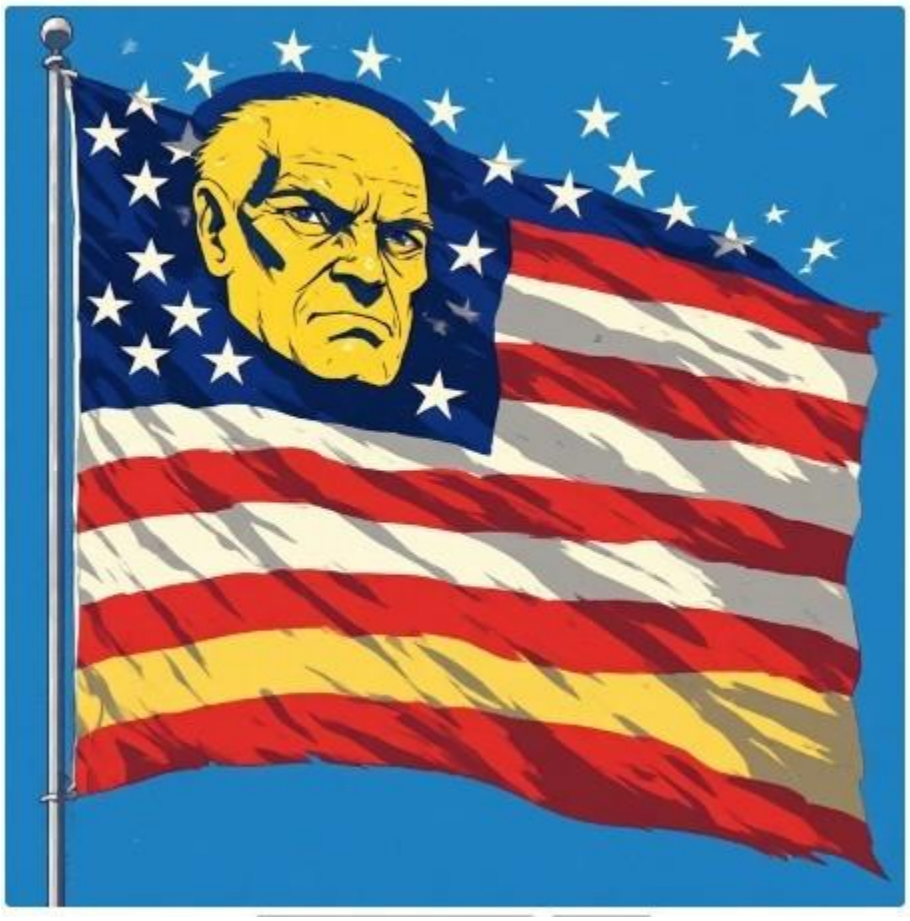
Liberation Day, a Future History of 2026 Dan Svyetlo, January 2026

Liberation Day is a work of political satire in the form of a fictional history of 2026. Written in January 2026 shortly before ICE agents killed 2 citizens in Minnesota, it imagines what might happen soon based on political, economic, technical and environmental trends to that point, and explores how people might react to these developments. There are numerous short descriptions of sex and violence. This work is entirely fictional. Readers may share this for free; no permission needed.



DISAPPOINTING

The new year starts with a whimper. That annoying little lickspittle Nestor Foom bungles the big reveal.

"You were going to show me something?" Maribel bends down to peer closer. "Looks like a skin tag. A wart? Wait a minute," she says, rummaging through her backpack. "I got nail clippers somewhere. If you need me to clip something." She fishes them out and snip, snips the scissors. "Too big?"

Nestor bursts into tears, and runs away, and halfway down the block remembers to zip up, but there's no hazard, he has shriveled up and tucked away very nicely.

That evening he records his Hard Rock manifesto and posts it on TikTok, explaining what Jesus would do to lesbians. No, this is not what you think; Nestor doesn't even own a machinegun, and there is no kindergarten nearby. Instead, he just rats out Maribel's family and videorecords as masked ICE thugs haul them away. It is 250 years since the Declaration of Independence.

Down South, another dalliance ends up awry.

Every day the Heartland come to pay homage, take the colonics and bask in the glamour at Palatial Resort & Spa, the President's home away from home. He prefers hotel living, where he can change the housekeepers, towel boys, masseuses and hair restoration staff weekly. By the time he starts to learn their first names, they start to call him by his; time for a change.

Ray the kitchen remodeler from Plaster, Tennessee (deals in weed, too, very small scale; keeps the clientele cheerfully oblivious to what he's doing to their home) is not so demanding. He just wants to see the President take lunch here, like the President does almost every day. Months ago Ray and Deloris donated $5K to the President's Scholarships for the Deserving Poor, dedicated to making sure every prep school has a few black faces to put on its brochure, in order to reserve a table on the far perimeter of the domed restaurant with the faintly Thief of Baghdad vibe, but near one of the doors, in case the President comes in by that one. Fifty minutes was all they could afford, but Ray is ever the optimist, which makes him a good salesman, or used to, before the President drove away his immigrant crews and the tariffs spiked prices on cabinetry from the EU, granite counter tops from Brazil, fake-marble counter tops from Viet Nam, and appliances from Bangalore.

For sure, the President is a business genius, everyone knows that-- richest man in the world, who looms over mere billionaires like the tumescent towers with which he has adorned downtowns on four continents. Soon factories will spring up across the land to replace imports, and highly skilled all-USA technicians will spring from the ground like dragon's teeth. But if Ray gets a chance to speak with the President --the *honor* to speak with the President-- and why shouldn't he? Ray is as worthy as any other red-blooded American, and in truth a little more-- if he gets a chance to talk with the President, he has a couple questions. He has been rehearsing them for weeks.

Back home, Ray tunes in religiously every day to watch the President lunching with an ever changing cast of streaming service celebrities and tall blonde former beauty queens turned agency directors, surrounded by hundreds of 3G fans at their tables, some overlooking the yachtscape stretching below them out to the blue blue horizon. Today aXiX the rapper slumps

sulkily with his bejeweled entourage, giving the stinkeye to last year's country music feenom Sgt. Comando and the four women crammed so close together at the teeny table a couple rows over that they have to keep adjusting their cowboy hats after midair collisions. For his part the Sgt. pretends to ignore the rapper, and gapes his mouth wide as if laughing uproariously at something the cowgirls said. As he pretends to laugh he looks around anxiously. No telling which way the President will come in, and who he will recognize in the crowd.

"I can't believe it," Ray says, grabbing Deloris' hand. "We're here! We made it!" With her free hand Deloris politely taps an escaping yawn back into her generous mouth, pasted with a generous glob of O,Really? lipstain. The 3G Banner, God Guns & Guts headlining the President in Rambo mode, stroking a massive machinegun at his hip, backs the dais where the President will lunch. (The best slogans, like the best religions, are open to participation. Thus you can say, God Grit Guts and Gore, or God, Gals, & 12-Gauge . . . Gears, Golf, Gonads . . . all sorts of witty contributions.) Ray figures the President probably doesn't look so cut in real life, but maybe when he was younger.

A door opens, the room's chatter subdues for a moment, but it's just another 3G Genius, as they call themselves; no President, and Ray's time is running out. At last the resort's spokeswoman, rather Palatial herself, steps on stage and announces that the President has cancelled today's lunch.

"We are so sorry. The President has to skip lunch today, and is jetting back to Washington as I speak to take care of a national security situation. You will only hear of the crisis if the President fails," she adds conspiratorially, "but He won't." She glides out of sight as the murmuring rises.

A few people get up and leave, but most stay in their seats. Ray asks his neighbor what does he suppose is going on. Raleigh the comics and collectibles investor says, "Maybe they're having a hard time getting him out of the tub. They say he spends half the morning soaking in a hot tub, watching TV, and they have a special harness to lift him out."

"This morning we went the Spa Platinum Venue. It still had the Open In dot dot dot Minutes sign blinking," Raleigh's wife or girlfriend observes spitefully. "Maybe that's the national security crisis."

Voices nearby get louder. "I paid good money," seems to be the frequent refrain. The guests are thinking of all the folks back home --the fellers at the racket club, the killer business brains in the Chamber, the other moms in the Kill M All Girls Hunting Society-- to whom they boasted of this once in a lifetime trip to meet the President. They begin exchanging tips on the best deep fake AI video compilers. But some choose a delegation to go to hotel management and complain.

"They can't treat us this way," Raleigh avows, as he watches placidly the protesters gather up their things and head to the lobby.

"The President just doesn't know," Ray replies. "He'd fix it if he knew." Come to think of it though, those daily videos of the President holding court at the Palatial, they are all taken from across the room. Closeups of the 1980s rock stars' grand entrances, but the President-- he's just a yellow glow among bobbing heads. Are the videos just promo to fill the room? Boy, that would be a dirty trick.

The woman next to Raleigh rolls her eyes and raises her glass. "Get me another," she demands.

A staffer in purple and gold livery comes to Ray's table. "Sir, your time is up. Please give a chance to the couple who are waiting." Ray looks apologetic and fumbles for his jacket. Deloris lays a restraining hand on his forearm.

"The President did not come," she tells the staffer, "but we are staying. Please send the waiter. I am gonna get plowed," she announces, and hiccups, and laughs out loud. Judging by the expressions on the faces of resort staff, other diners throughout the room seem to share the sentiment.

Alain the Trillionaire promised an AI Presence to replace the President on screen, but it doesn't work. Trained on 40 years of the President's public appearances, it comes off as merely childishly petulant and randomly demented.

"Alain, man, you are breaking my heart," says Julian, the President's Chief of Staff and ex-son-in-law, as his hand wavers over the donuts in the box they are passing around, finally alighting on one sprinkled with chocolate ants. "Where's the spite? Where is the misogyny, the persecution complex, the vindictiveness? 3G will never buy it."

"You chose the data you wanted us to train on," Alain points out. His head fills the wall screen like a massive fungus, impassive and inexorable, threatening to spill over onto the people in this windowless room beneath the Annex. "You asked for a Presence for on-line interviews, when the President is ill disposed."

"Reboot it."

"We've done that, over and over. This President is a lot harder to replicate than the guy he replaced." Alain seems to take no offense to these complaints. By now he is used to the nitpicking of small minds. "Anyhow, screen presences are old hat. We are redirecting our resources to fully mobile autonomous 3D real time AI systems."

"You mean-- "

"Yes, you will have a fully operable President in 6 months, indistinguishable from the original. We are working out the last challenges as I speak. Of course, you are welcome any time to hire another AI provider," he concludes. "We get paid either way."

Alain is right; his contracts are ironclad. And Julian trusts no one else to keep this project under wraps.

"Keep trying," Julian ends lamely. The big head on screen shrivels and blinks out.

"I warned you about that guy," rumbles Ominous Grease. "He's been promising us an AI for months." He waves his palm screen above his head, as proof. "July 14, 2023, he promised we'd have a working Presence by this time last year." Ominous (not his real name), slovenly veteran of the disinformation wars, fancies himself the power behind the throne. Others of the inner council regard him as a small-time grifter, but he has virtually unlimited access to the President, especially in the wee hours, when the President can't sleep. Ominous has been jailed twice for fraud, and twice pardoned by the President. (The second time, though, the President let him moulder in the pokey 104 days for being too familiar-- for taking him, the President, for granted. Lazy majesty, they call it, because the king is really lazy if he puts up with this crap.

The President is not always functional, but he remembers slights, and he never forgets to exact retribution.) These days Ominous' income seems to come mainly from renting out access to mid-level functionaries whose careers require a few minutes with the President. In his abundant spare time, the O.G. churns out books on such weighty topics as George Washington's born-again transformation in the depths of despair at Valley Forge, Russia's exemplary triumph over lesbians and all they stand for, and the need for universities to embrace our Judaeo-Christian heritage. He disdains donuts, bringing instead some kind of fishy sour milk concoction, wrapped in tin foil, which he tosses toward the trash can in the corner and invariably misses. O.G. smells of garlic and day-old sweat.

"You know, that preternatural calm, that lack of affect, Alain could be a robot himself," muses Julian's factotum Chandler. He is more spot-on than he realizes. The real Alain sits moping in a sunless basement somewhere, living off the pasta and tomato sauce they shove twice a day through the grate in the door. The meat Alain is getting fat, but no more morose than usual.

So, by default, they continue to use the President's AI, but sparingly, to simulate the President's late night social media rants by which he is present in the world; and employ an army of editors to redact the befuddled grandpa stuff, and sharpen the attacks on women and people of color, just like the President of old, before it's all posted.

Only later do they stumble across the hidden cost: the AI has been slyly diverting Social Security revenues to fund Presidential Sweets, the President's latest real estate venture-- heavily surveilled and guarded island hideaways scattered across the globe for throned and dethroned generals, dictators, oligarchs, CEOs, gangsters, crypto kings, megachurch pastors and other criminal masterminds. (By 2025, PS have largely replaced prisons as the schools, summits and job fairs for the global criminal elite. They claim to be pioneers as well in climate-proof construction, elevating whole palaces, even small islands, above projected sea-level rise for the rest of the century-- claims yet to be demonstrated.) Julian fears to employ this AI, and fears to replace it, lest they end up with another even crazier.

These are the other members of the donut club, as they call it:

* Marta from Moldova, the President's wife Number 3. Marta is a scold, and the President traded her in long since, yet somehow he can't seem to get along without her. Her teen son is off to school in the U.K. He has not yet proven himself a smarmy little suck-up like the President's other progeny, so Marta has high hopes for his prospects. She does not even consider the President's daughters. You can take the girl out of the Old Country, but you can't take the Old Country out of the girl: somehow Marta has the quaint idea that only males can inherit the mantle. Marta is useful to this group, because she knows how to handle the President when he misbehaves-- how best to flatter him, how to calm his sudden rages and reel him back after the wild tumbles through the looking glass. Certainly no one else wants the job.

* Sergei the President whisperer, a modest billionaire who spends more time at the White House than on Wall Street-- much better return on investment. In this case his market advantage is inside information-- from the President's mouth to God's ear, God being the Ivan

the Testicle, Lord of all the Russias, who took the U.S. President under his wing some 30 years ago, and still dispenses fatherly advice about world affairs.

* the Chainsaw Prince, so named because of the mess he left in the basement of his country's embassy in Tughluqabad, and because the 3G rank and file can't remember his real name -- Abdul, Sinbad, Salaami Salaami Baloney, something like that. The new King's nephew and boyhood playmate, and now the King's chief troubleshooter.

* Architect Innis. The President is a lazy bastard with the attention span of a butterfly, but he gets grumpy when he doesn't have reason to order people around. So Marta and Julian have encouraged him to undertake a kaleidoscope of projects to restore the country's glory. For instance, the U.S. flag may have been all very well when Betsy DeVos was sewing it by candlelight, but you really got to update if you want to keep the customers coming. Also, Jesus University has asked the President to narrate a 12-DVD series about the persecution of Christians from Biblical times to the present day, which will tie in nicely with the President's wish to have a new set of bombing targets every quarter.

But the President likes nothing so much as very big toys, and these days the work that tickles him the most is the construction of the new Grand Processional Hall that will bisect the Ellipse and plunk down onto Constitution Avenue via monumental steps that will rival Odesa's Potemkin Stairway. And for that, Architect Innis is the perfect partner for the President. Young, engaging, refreshingly open to new ideas, Innis is also intensely ambitious and practiced in ingratiating himself with old white men. He explains to the President that, with all the new materials and design tech, he can have the GPH (not to be confused with BPH, though it will become hard to tell one from the other) up and running in a year.

"Think of it, a hallway a quarter mile long, rising in tiers, and kings and presidents marching to Glory Hallelujah on the PA, until they stand before you on the Golden Throne."

"I want it high, way above them, so that they are like, eye level with my toes."

"I'll get you diamond toe rings for them to kiss."

Innis tells Julian it will cost a billion dollars.

"Seems like a lot, I know, but consider what else the President might turn his attention to instead."

Julian takes the point, and waves his hand. "Go for it. Mexico will pay for it." This remark startles Innis, until Julian bursts out laughing.

"Anyhow," Julian continues, "I think I know how you can save on labor costs," and he gives Innis the architect Nina's inside number, over there at Homeland Sex.

Innis and his design team set up in the Dept. of Education, vacant for some time now.

* Nina Vagina, as they call her to her face --she tosses her head and laughs every time, O you boys, and curls her hand at the wrist-- Nina disposes of more firepower than Sergei or the Chainsaw combined. The President appointed her to run Homeland Sex because she looks great in a bandolier and grenade belt --yep, that's the sum total of her combat accoutrement in earlier online incarnations --emphasize the carnal-- keep it simple, is her fashion philosophy--

and also because she shepherded through Congress the greatest law enforcement appropriations bill ever.

Nina is no estupida. Through a special friend in the Secret Service, Nina makes sure both roles show up on the President's screens. The generals and spymasters who welcomed her appointment, thinking they can just elbow her aside and carry on business as usual, soon find out very different. Right quick she has replaced dozens of the top desk jockeys with her own appointees.

The VP makes that mistake, too. He allies with her to contain the President's families, but then finds she is not so easy to dismiss when he has no more use for her. He finds he's stuck with this ineradicable suppurating sore like a chancre on his prick. Nina is the only member of the official cabinet --the only department head-- who sits on the executive committee. But given that Homeland Sux encompasses the FBI, CIA, NSA, ICE, the Border Patrol, and half a dozen other cryptically named, abundantly financed security agencies, Nina has access to a lot of useful information, some of which she shares. In particular, the other attendees are interested in the current disposition of domestic rivals and enemies, in the party and without. Nina is there to report.

* Doctor Melchior keeps the President keen and masterful with a proprietary mix of turmeric enemas, ayurvedic incense and alternating massive doses of speed and sleeping pills. Thanks to the doctor's unspecified services, the President's latest wife has a new baby boy. And Melchior has taken the trouble to learn the President's favorite video games. They spend hours in happy communion, jiggling their joysticks.

Doctor Melchior knows his place, and mostly keeps his mouth shut at these meetings, except to update the others on the daily struggle to reassemble the President from the physical and mental mechanisms that keep flaking and breaking off, and to take instructions as to key events for which he must jolt the President awake and articulate.

Like Nina, Melchior is just there to report. But he has his professional integrity. One day, after a particularly vile Presidential episode at 3AM, Julian calls Melchior and demands the President be sedated, permanently if possible. The doctor objects.

"You know his regimen. He's been pushing the limit for months, and more meds will just make him crazier. I am not going to risk killing the President, and I will resign tomorrow if you think you can do a better job."

This is a rare rebuke from the Doctor, and Julian respects that. Melchior will not come cheap. In any case, the Chief of Staff wants no harm to come to the President until a favorable succession has been arranged.

* Vice President Rance Rind, who never thought he'd rise so high, and now aims to take one step further. Mystery financier Pearl Dangwidge met the young man at a bash she was throwing for the YoT (Youth of Today) at his alma mater, and took a shine to the budding campus politician. An internship with one of Dangwidge's investment companies, and then a whirlwind tour of Caribbean hotspots on the oligarch's boat. Pearl herself is old and fat and feeble, but she likes to watch. The Veep will be forever in the billionaire's debt, for the good

times had by all, the millions with which she pumps up his political campaigns, and from fear that Pearl has kept recordings.

Vice President Rind seeks to establish his brand by foreign affairs jaunts to Greenland, Dubai, Fiji, Antibes, Australia, the Bahamas and other global hotspots. Julian nixes his demand for a military escort, but Nina promptly supplies a good facsimile. Now, whenever the VP steps down from Air Force Deux, he can trot through a phalanx of ICE agents dressed in black and toting machineguns-- great optics, he reckons. Also, he figures Nina's generosity means she knows her place.

Now and again Rana from Rajputana, wife Number 4 --or is it 5?-- drops in with her mum and baby. Mrs. Chowdry makes it a point to stop in DC 3 or 4 times a year, on her way to one or another province of her far-flung industrial empire. She and the President have some joint interests in hazardous waste facilities in East Africa, but mainly she's staking a claim for her grandson. Marta, having her own interest in the succession, makes herself scarce when Mrs. Chowdry is in town, but Chowdry does not stay long. Marta would have Dr. Melchior poison Rana's baby, easy enough, but she knows Mama Chowdry would send a kill squad --Thuggee or dacoits or Ghurkhas, no doubt, to despatch them all by kris or kukri, or mayhap cobra venom and the spores of malignant fungi dispersed through the ventilation system. Mrs. Chowdry has the resources to do it, too, many times the President's paltry fortune. Ma Kali Hun! Even the Chainsaw is afraid of her.

Rana herself is a sweet kid, and the men appreciate how charmingly she suckles her baby. Marta snorts and rolls her eyes, but otherwise holds her peace.

These players are the uneasy alliance of those with daily access to the President, colluding to keep out everyone else. Every so often the President remembers someone from his early days in the cartage business in NYC. "Nick the Knob," he'll say. "Whatever happened to Nick the Knob? Is he dead?" Invariably his handlers answer yes, unless the old pal is still on media they cannot control. But the President rarely asks a second time. And they can't always tell if he is remembering a real person. Once he asked for Spiderman.

They call themselves the Executive Committee, or donut club for short. They are the inner cabinet above the official cabinet. Envious outsiders call them the Regency, and figuratively hammer on the doors to get in.

The donut club does not invite Karen SpoX, the White House spokesAI, because in no way do they want it to report on their conversations. Instead, as they deliberate, they turn off the Karen-- which is to say, their other devices do not detect it, which is to say, the other devices do not report that they detect it. No one really knows what the softwares do in their private lives, or which is swapping data with which.

Every day, after the meeting, Julian texts a list of the day's topics for the Karen to emphasize at the White House press conference. A typical list might include

- the White House prayer service with 40 of the nation's top online evangelists
- the President's latest Peace Price
- the price of corn flakes so low they are practically giving them away

• missile strikes on some city in Africa
• how stinky some woman governor's genitals are
• the President' record bench press benchmark
• the 2,000 Bitcoin every citizen will soon receive from the U.S. Treasury, except naturalized citizens, who will be deported
• the vile threat to women from the vile invaders on our sacred shores
• missile strikes on some city in South America. . . .

Vivvian Victoria, famous commentator for the God Guns & Guts demographic, talk show host and former journalist, sues the White House for stealing her likeness for the Karen Presence. Leonard X, the White House Counsel AI, sneers at VV's presumption. It Bbllurrtts, "We trained the Karen on decades' worth of recordings --yes, some of you have been around for 30 years-- by 14 different individual narrow blonde nasal 3G pundits with prominent jaws and flawless skin, most of them women. If anything, Vivv, you should be suing those others for stealing your likeness-- and they should sue you."

The Secretary of War complains when they won't let him sit in on the meetings of the regency. "I've got nukelar missiles, for crissake!"

Julian is stern. "It's enough for you that I attend. I will tell you all you need to know."

"Then how come Nina Vagina gets to sit in and I don't?"

"Nina is there in case the President drops in. He likes her. While he's flirting, she'll keep his nose out of our business. Do you want to flirt with the President?" Well, the SOW sort of does, but he knows he doesn't stand a chance.

In fact the President rarely drops in any more. For one thing, Julian schedules the donut club meetings for 8AM, just about the time the President is going sleepy-bye.

ICE agents meet 19 burly Afrikaners at the foot of the rolling stairway and wave them through Customs. Funny, they don't look persecuted, though it is true that some of them have spent time in nasty jails across their continent. After cursory training and more thorough outfitting, the imports will become the core of the Liaison Unit between ICE and the White House; in essence, the regency's private police force, at the regents' disposal for any assignments. The orders have to go through Nina, of course, but so far she has done everything Julian asks.

The President does still receive cabinet members, one at a time, in his chambers below. He enjoys their fulsome praise but gets bored and confused when they try to explain their work. Mostly they text him one-screen files with his photo at top and bottom, and three or four bullet points in between. Like a lot of old people, the President may have misplaced his marbles but he's cagey and suspicious. He figures that, by meeting the cabinet members separately, he prevents them ganging up on him. He has no idea that Julian's morning meetings are, essentially, the ruling junta for the entire administration.

Although these basement meetings with the President meander pointlessly and lead to no resolution of any of the myriad problems the cabinet secretaries wrestle with every day, or choose to ignore, they are not entirely a waste of time. Unless he sees his department heads in

person every week or two, the President forgets their names, and then forgets that they exist. They come to pay tribute so as not to find out by BBllurrtt that they have been replaced by yet another random 3G wannabe.

In addition to her seat at Julian's 8 o'clock, Marta rules this underground realm. You can think of it as the inner inner sanctum, the womb of the White House: the fourth level below ground where dwell the President, Marta, Rana, Dr. Melchior and a cast of women with low expectations from all over the world, rotating thrice a day like nurses on shift. Patience, a ready smile and a streak of self-destructiveness seem to be the main qualifications for these exotic beauties-- a far cry from the surly anorexics he used to pay to hang on his arm. The women spend most of their time below snuggled up to the President in their underwear. Every so often they might give the President an encouraging grope, just to see if he's conscious, which he may or may not perfunctorily return. His heart's just not in it anymore, nor any other part.

The President always fancied he'd like to buy his own harem, cooing doves and absinthe sorbet transported on camelback from the Hindu Kush, and now he's living the life. Somehow he thought there'd be a lacy pavilion above a lush garden and splashing fountains spouting from satyrs' bellybuttons, all caressed by mountain zephyrs bearing a hint of jasmine. Whatever jasmine is.

"Say, Stellar," he addresses the tall refugee from Sarajevo, "remind me to ask Chainsaw something."

The President used to demand that the women have sex with each other, so that he could watch. They will not, not for show. Stellar casts him a scathing look while Annamaria snatches the remote and flicks on the Lesbo Action channel. Then they stalk out.

"Angie, come on, don't be like that," the President coaxes. "Angie, I order you to come back! Stellar, baby!" he shouts into the empty hallway, trying and failing to rise from the river raft size pillows that have nearly engulfed him. He fumbles around for the intercom, finds it on the string around his neck, and thumbs the button for Marta. "They ran out on me. Make them come back!"

But Marta, too, has no room for this nonsense and just turns off the comm.

When he is behaving, the women mostly sit on his left, because he right shoulder is just about gone, and he bursts into tears when anyone happens to squeeze that side. Once Rana gets so mad at him she punches his shoulder and he sags over, puking and fainting. Rana, horrified, yells for Melchior, who lies as usual sprawled out napping in the bowling alley, his sweater tucked up under his head, and the doctor strolls in at a leisurely pace.

"Help me prop him up," he directs Rana, and the two of them tug the President upright, so he does not smother under his own weight like a beached whale. A couple quick injections, and the President comes to with a start, wondering where he is, but feeling no pain.

"You dropped off to sleep, dear," Rana tells him. "You feeling OK?"

"Sure. I feel good. I feel good. Gives us a kiss."

"And look here," she says, "You've soiled your nightie. Let me fetch you another."

Thereafter, when they reach their utmost limits with the President's incoherent tirades, the other women try the same treatment, with excellent results. Not when Marta's around, for sure. In his reports to the regency Doctor Melchior notes the rapid deterioration of the President's

joints; and collaborates with the architect Innis to fashion a light, battery-operated brace to fit under the President's jacket, to allow him to seem to be signing the decrees Julian piles on his desk.

For the most part, though, the President feels safe and secure in his underground White House. When Julian visits, he comes armed with today's file of threat reports against the President, compiled by Nina's staff and carefully curated by the Secretary herself.

"Folks would love to see you, Sir, but I don't want you to do anything you are not comfortable with," Julian tells his boss and mentor. "With all these crazy maniacs trying to gun you down, or shoot Hellfire missiles at you, I think 3G should cut you a little slack right now, don't you? After all you've done for them. And you can visit perfectly well on screen."

Even on the golden toilet the President is surrounded by screens, so he can watch himself dictate ALL CAPS threats against women, showerheads, Ukraine, women, toilets, various underlings, pollsters, economists, women, into the wee hours of the morning. Still speeding, he watches endless loops of his old TV shows and claymation-quality animations of his speeches before vast cheering crowds. His handlers make sure this is the closest of closed-circuit TV.

When one of the servants lets slip about the Presidential Presence, Marta exiles her immediately to clean toilets at one of the lesser palaces in the Lesser Antilles. The President himself is outraged, but Marta knows how to calm him down. She shows him the Presence on a big screen at the Youth of Today rally, and the simulacrum's witty remarks, and the joyous response of the boisterous crowd-- how much is CGI even Marta does not know. The President is enchanted. He claps his hands and gurgles with delight. Marta tells Rana to let him share her tit with his baby son.

Marta is pretty good at her job. There is no competition to replace her.

Doctor Billie stomps into Data Evaluation, the office at Centers for Disease Control where epidemiologists collate and analyze medical reports from all over the world. "Is this your work?" she demands, waving a blue folder.

"That's mine," says Doctor Gordon, ready to take the blame. "That's ours," Dr. Taylor corrects. The other analysts stand up behind their screens.

"It's SHIT!" Billie screams. "This is not what I want at all." She looks at the cover page. "'Rising Incidence of Worrisome New Variant. Response Options.' I specifically asked you to review the many well-documented studies on the efficacy of prayer and church membership." She flings the folder across the room, scattering the sheets.

Gordon pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and responds mildly, "The EU reports some promising vaccination trials. We can get on top of this."

Billie peers at his plastic ID. "What's your name. Gordon? You're fired. You," she points to Taylor. "You're the manager now."

"Naah," Taylor replies. "I don't think so."

"OK, you're fired, too." Half the staff can't afford to lose their jobs. The other half quit. So Doctor Billie has to count this day as a success. Even so, she storms off into her office, slams the

door and collapses at her desk, sobbing with rage and frustration. Why can't they give her what she wants?

After work, Julian and Dudek get together for a couple drinks at a potted palm lounge with AC cranked up and pretty, frosty waitstaff. Dudek is an old pal of the President, a partner in many of the President's early ventures, which is where he met Julian. When Julian married the boss' daughter, Dudek gave them a house on Long Island Sound, and next year a boat. When they split up, Julian got the boat, as was only fair; after all, who married who?

Dudek likes doing favors. He did many for the President, back in the old days, in Dudek's capacity as unelected and rarely seen boss of the Builders and Concrete Union. He smoothed out many an obstacle, and (very unobtrusively) shared the President-to-be's success, and none of his failures. He likes receiving favors, too.

Today Dudek meets Julian not as a crime boss, not as a procurer of impossible permits or dispatcher of kneecappers, no, none of that; he's just one wealthy donor among many, collecting some face time and sounding out the erstwhile protege for petty favors.

For instance, Dudek's grandson Ethan, who just graduated City College with a degree in civil engineering --the Dean of Students got a very good deal on a swimming pool that summer-- and who'd like to find a job that leaves him time for his numerous hobbies. "Something behind a desk," Dudek suggests, "you know, monitoring. Supervising. Like that."

"I know just what you mean," Julian agrees. Julian does not want any crime boss offspring on his team. If the kid's sharp, he'll be leaking all sorts of prime material to his grand-dad-- say, the latest round of navy contracts, making them harder for Julian himself to sell. If he's dull and sullen, unlike his own nepo-baby self, the grandson will be underfoot all the time, and likely to take offense at the slightest hint of managerial direction. Then what's he going to say to Dudek? A security risk in the worst way, Julian decides.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Julian says. "The administration is so stodgy, you know, rules and red tape everywhere. Not much room for a gung-ho lad like your Ethan. But I know someone who could really use your grandson's help. You know what the CDC is? It's like, in charge of diseases for the whole country. Grandma gets sick, they call CDC and they fix her right up."

"I don't know, Julian. Sounds kind of boring. Squishy. I'm not sure it's the kind of thing Ethan would go for. You got anything in the line of, say, military precurement?"

Absolutely not! Julian does not shout. That pie is already spoken for, and half-eaten. "No, really, it's a big deal. CDC controls the research funding for half the drug companies. It tells the hospitals what to do. And Doctor Billie," he says, lowering his voice, "great gal, you know, but not a lot of experience handling all the jobbers with their hands out. Honestly, I think your boy could really help."

Dudek rolls the cigar from one cheek to the other, nodding thoughtfully. OK. Ethan's not his favorite anyway.

Neither is Doctor Billie Julian's favorite. A shrill, grandstanding pain in the ass. Let her deal with the kid; mess her up good. So that's settled.

They talk about old acquaintances for another couple drinks. When Dudek stands, he tells Julian, "Give a hey to the President for me."

"Sure thing, Dudek. He'll be sorry he missed you." These days the President has more plaque in his skull than memory, but he does remember his old pal Dudek.

Julian sees another petitioner not long after.

Freddie Pester dawdled his way through law school, spending more time on his hobbies: gambling and politics. He was a pretty good card player, and fleeced the college buddies who sat at table with him; then went on to get skinnt himself when he tried to play with the professionals online.

He gets better results from fascism. Age 16, he'd founded his prep school's chapter of Junior Youth of Today, and remained in charge through the undergraduate years. He parlayed that to a membership in YoT at college, but his snobby classmates reject Freddie's repeated bids to head the chapter.

Freddie gets his first big break in law school, when he follows up on rumors about romance between the Dean and a recent hire. It takes six months of scandal, but finally Freddie gets them both fired. The Dean and her boy toy are core members of the national legal movement to overturn the abuses of the Fourteenth Amendment by big corporations, and in this way Freddie helps quash a hundred billion dollar threat to the corporados. For a while Freddie is a movement hero, starts his own talk show, and counsels other YoT how to combat the leftwing conspiracy in colleges across the land. Meanwhile he fails the bar exam twice.

Then the President becomes President. Freddie figures he'd be a good fit for the federal gummint. The national chair of Youth of Today USA, who schooled with the President's Chief of Staff, sets up a meet for Freddie.

Julian tells Freddie, "DOJ just put together a unit to ferret out traitors in Congress. You won't need a law license, we got plenty of guys got that. Just nose around, pull the pieces together for our Attorney General Leonard X."

"I thought he was the White House counsel."

"DOJ, too. Amazing what these softwares can do."

Freddie shrugs. "Tempting, but I already done the Fetch, Boy thing. I want a supervisor job at the Dept of Energy. I think I could do more damage there. If that would be all right with you."

Julian leans back in his chair, clasps hands in his lap, studies the young man across the desk. Julian remembers sitting on the other side of the boss' desk, not so very long ago.

"All right, we'll find you a place. See what you can do. You'll answer to me." Julian thinks he may have found his very first protege. The President's protege himself, Julian sees adopting his own favorites as another step in his ascension.

The President posts a photo of himself atop the turret of the U.S.S. Jefferson Davis, shot from below as if he were astride the enormous 18-inchers. "Biggest navy in the world. The biggest in all history, if you want to know the truth." The slow, rusty, leaky JD had been decommissioned by the President's evil predecessor, but the President had it specially resurrected for this very purpose. Even Ivan the Testicle can't shake 18 inches.

"We can't do that," Kenny says. "We cannot do that."

"Sure we can," Klein says, and slugs back another. "Afterwards, we just round up the lawyers and tell them to tell us we can. This DOJ knows how to do what they're told." He holds up the plastic cup to be refilled.

A beefy gent in t-shirt, shorts and shoulder holster sloshes more bourbon into the cup. The helpful man's neck and shoulders are freckled from the sun. These men are bobbing in Chesapeake Bay under a canopy, on Martin's big fishing charter boat, lines out, but no one is paying attention to marine wildlife; they got bigger fish to fry, so to speak. Some, like Klein, run to a comfortable lard that stretches buttons but does not undermine the authority of their distinguished, massive, grayed heads. Others' trim bodies and ramrod postures belie their casual civvies. They drink quietly and hide expressions behind dark glasses. They stretch sunbeaten arms and salmon-pale legs.

"Of course, but to get to that point we got to have that credibility in the first place." Kenny replies. "We got to be on rock-solid ground." They all know he's right. A lot of officers will risk their lives, or perform the appearance of doing so, for combat experience and juicy war-time promotions, but the same burning ambition mandates super cover-your-ass caution when it comes to office politics. And this time it's the biggest office in the world, and these dozen professional killers are months or years out of the chain of command.

"No hurt to draw the map," says Martin, "Just in case in comes to that." He means make a plan. He and the other former admiral and generals brainstorm senior active-duty officers they can approach, and how they might sound them out, and who will take which candidate.

These are men of skill and experience, and too wily to show their hands all at once. Martin knows that in the run up to every war, some know what needs to be done, but will forever hem and haw, hope for some compromise, hope that the enemy will faceplant himself. They won't commit til the war is half won.

The other part of it is that what troubles these gents is the same thing that holds them back: the military's honored role in a democracy, and now its steady erosion. These men are all personally or professionally pissed off at the traitor in the White House. They have been scolded like naughty children by clueless draft dodgers. Some have been unceremoniously ousted from high positions and replaced with loathesome hacks. Others enjoy the role of elder statesmen, used to mentoring promising mid-career officers and comfortable about discreetly critiquing the top brass.

Now they feel the services they have devoted their lives to have been perverted to serve the buffoon looting what is fast becoming a squalid, third-rate banana republic. They keep in close touch with their former colleagues throughout the six branches, some of whom are likewise distressed, but less free to think and plan than the men on the boat. The conversation now, though, scrapes raw the principle going back to Washington that the military stands outside partisan politics, that it takes orders from elected civilian government.

As long as they could count on big budgets and cushy jobs in the weapons industry after leaving active service, the generals were happy to stay at arms' length from civilian politics. So it's by no means a given that the officer corps as a whole will resist the administration's tender attentions. It's not as if nobody ever experienced abuse from the higher-ups within the military itself.

Martin doesn't know if it will be Kenny who falters at the last minute, or Klein, or one of the others. Regardless, the main thing is to get the plan underway. Then the pieces will start dropping into place until they become nigh irrevocable.

The 12 talk about comm security, as they have on countless other operations, and here they have to trust that Martin is not recording everything they say. Well, not entirely trust; as Martin's boat drew up to the Tidal Basin that morning, two independent teams were scanning it remotely for spyware. Conversations like this, no one takes notes or runs a laser pointer over a power point-- it's just small talk among old colleagues. Anyone needs reminding in between these fishing trips, they will get a note from Major Or, the helpful man with the bourbon and the photographic memory.

These men are the General Staff Retirees Club. They call themselves Jolly Roger, for short.

General Frisbee, plain-spoken, grizzled vet of 14 wars, has been a frequent and vehement critic of the Secretary of War and the new Joint Chiefs appointees. As such he has become something of an internet sensation, and an unlikely hero to despairing liberals relegated to keyboard activism. Frisbee just will not shut up, and after a few attempts to threaten him backfire, Nina Vagina wisely decides to ignore him. The more Frisbee ends up on the leftish talk shows, between disquisitions on worker coops, liberation theology, and fiery speakers shaking fists at angry crowds in Dhaka or Tahrir Square, the faster he loses credibility with the military rank and file, while all his associates fall under Nina's intense scrutiny. Martin warns the other General Staff Retirees to have nothing to do with him, and they can see why.

The economy has its ups and downs.

On the up side, the VP chairs a two day conference at Pearl Dangwidge's mountain ski resort. Plenty of room for a couple dozen billionaires and Justice Endocarp, too, and in truth the Justice gets a kick out of hobnobbing with these giants of industry & finance. The other attendees, stars of the 3G movement, occupy only slightly less palatial digs at the big hotels along the Sierra Riviera-- all on the billionaires' dime, of course. What are they doing here? The 3Gs' idea of winter sports are TV hockey and drinking.

Both groups love the President, but tensions have been simmering among them for quite a while. The 3Gs want a revolution, the rich guys want to dial it back. But they understand the 3G point of view, really they do. It's the same as any outgroup since Sumer, pressing their noses against the windows of the rich and famous. The 3G celebrities want their piece of the pie, a big piece.

The billionaires are prepared to be generous. By Saturday night they have scheduled interviews in the side rooms, sussing out which movement heavyweights might fit which jobs they have open or can invent, without doing too much damage; and they sign media contracts with abandon, to soak up the rest. In return, the billionaires want the 3Gs to stifle this mindless antagonism to trade with China, their endless nagging and threats against Big Tech, their demands for expensive and useless government forays into war and religion.

Not all are so easily bought. Ominous Grease, for instance, skips the conference and snipes from the sidelines. And there are so many wannabes who did not get an invite at all, but note

with envious eyes the results. The 3G appetite for power and place can never be truly satisfied, and the billionaires know it. They know that the deals they strike on the mountain merely buy them some time before they have to take more definitive measures.

Ominous signs on the horizon, though, quite aside from O.G.

The AI wipeout proceeds apace. The machine learning 'ware replaces 4% of U.S. workers in 2025, and another 14% in the New Year. Half of new college grads cannot find work; employment prospects for 2027 look even grimmer. The people who still have jobs are in no mood to buy anything more than food, heating, housing. For one thing, it is next to impossible to extract anything sensible from the sociopathic AIs who have overnight become the pixilated faces of corporate America. Try to buy a car, an umbrella, a gallon of gas, all you get is endless haggling on the part of machines who know your consumer preferences, incomes and bank accounts to the nickel, and price to extract the last one. Anything that eludes their hundred thousand sensors is merely lunch for the next AI you have to deal with.

Makes Gentry the young tech very angry that the People of Color, that's what you call them these days, keep taking his job. He'd go home, but his parents disowned him after the last election, and he vows not to go crawling back. He wears his best Own the Libs bandanna to online job interviews, but to his suprise, that does not seem to inspire prospective employers. So the HR AIs are in on it, too. What kind of capitalists are these, anyhow?

The Import Export Council, representing some 40% of U.S. corporations, propose a nationwide job freeze until the tariffs are canceled. That means current college seniors have until graduation to keep their fingers crossed. Some of the billionaires who own big pieces of these companies protest, saying it undermines the President's plans, which it surely would, if the President had plans.

Turns out Julian has diverted half the U.S. tariff revenues to Palatial Resort's crypto service, and word is leaking; he does not have much time to cash out. One last pump and dump, and he needs the other big crypto manipulators to help. (His group chat is a who's who of the insider oligarchs, those who get advance notice of the play, and will share the payout.) As per prior agreement, Julian's go-fer Chandler phones in to start the crash, only to find the North Koreans have beaten them to the punch by half a minute. Korean tech slaves in the underground prison city of Wa have long warred on the rest of the crypto world, an arms race of mutual hacking, suddenly made obsolete by AIs who can break any blockchain. The crash wipes Julian's cartel, while Pyongyang's Beloved Leader is once again flush with cash for his nuclear missile and biowar programs.

Moments after NK sucks his billions into its digital black hole, Julian threatens his partners and demands that they make up the loss, for which they'll get a tax cut, before the world finds out what has happened to the tariff revenues. But the crypto wizards have been wiped out, too. Julian has Nina send a team to the Customs & Tariffs Office over at Treasury, to arrest for malfeasance anyone above the level of assistant flunky, and sets Leonard X the White House Counsel AI to figuring out how to hold them indefinitely, without any embarrassing public trial. Naturally, one immediate effect of the purge is to depress tariffs income even further.

As a large fraction of the personal fortunes of the 3G rank and file are tied up in crypto, the movement's lavish funding dries up overnight. Not that it matters that much; already Julian is thinking, soon he won't need 3G any more.

The public outcry, and the arrests at Treasury, prompt many of the surviving oligarchs to flee the country. Some gather in small chat groups to skull out ways to rid themselves of the regency. Carlo Yam, a junior partner at one of the hedge funds, sidles up to the Vice President as he tries on stylish kevlar before leading an ICE team to round up dangerous Guatemalan moms in Greenwich CT.

"Sir, the Pearl sends her love, and invites you to dine with her tonight."

"Sure, love to, is she in town? She could join us." He nods to the men in masks.

Sergeant Byork interrupts. "Sir, we are about ready to go. And the camera people are waiting on site. Like to get there before the targets get the wind up." The VP makes a face and waves him off.

"Unfortunately, she will have to miss this occasion. But we've got a jet waiting for you at the airport."

"Can you wait a couple hours? This should not take long."

"Of course. At your leisure."

"Carlo, is it? I've seen you around. A year or two behind me."

"That's right, Sir. You may have known me as Menander."

"Sure, Menander, Models and Algos, right? I remember. Say, Carlo, what's it all about? I haven't heard from the Pearl in ages."

"Well, of course she will fill you in. What I can say is that a few of the partners are interested in forming a Job Creators' Task Force, to help the President any way we can. And Pearl thinks you'd be perfect to head it up."

The VP thinks so, too. He allows as how he'd do anything for Pearl, she's like his second mom.

And to be doubly sure, Carlo asks, "And what about the President, sir?"-- meaning the Chief of Staff. "Will you need to check in with him first?"

"I don't answer to Julian," snarls VP Rind.

When the Veep rejoins the ICE team, Sergeant Byork demonstrates his elan by barking, "Right, men. Listos? You know what to do." He waves his fist and shouts, "Kill m all!" His pals and underlings shout "Kill m all!" They don't mean it, of course. The ICE handbook (a .pdf most have never seen, and cannot read) states explicitly that they should only shoot people who resist. But it's a catchy phrase, a spree decor and all that, and it flatters the SOW who thought it up.

Byork (nee Eulalio) and his pals get their start in 10th grade in some godforsaken Texas backwater, distributing meth for the local militia. When the billions start rolling in and ICE begins offering very generous sign-up bonuses for new recruits, militias all across the country flock to join, and so do Byork and his gang. A small kickback and the swastika tattoos are all the new recruits need to get signed on to the nation's premier lawless enforcement agency. Their mission: search and deport the many, many enemies of God, Guns and Guts. Now Byork

is an NCO, and splits with his squad the $500 bounty on every suspected immigrant they drag to the local hoosegow. They make more money than ever they could have from desperate addicts. There's no reward for actually checking IDs, and no penalty whatsoever for failing to do so. The President has given ICE weekly arrest quotas, and Byork's gang regularly exceeds theirs.

Alain the Trillionaire gets the contract to update the Pentagon's payroll system. This one deal alone pays approximately 200 times more than he contributed to the President's favorite charity. From the Pentagon his AIs tunnel into the entire federal employee database, and then their health records, and then every individual health record in the country, and about as many overseas. From there it is but a short electronic hop to Social Security. Alain's ware combines these with scrapings from every social media platform to create an inconceivably extensive database on some five hundred million individuals, second only to China's. Alain's AIs know all these workers and consumers better than their own moms-- their friends and enemies, bosses and subordinates, politics, favorite celebrities, credit card balances, secret romances, preferences in bath soap, porn, and if they read, books. As one might expect, along with all this digital plundering, Alain's AIs have picked up a few virii here and there, and are soon firehosing Alain's stolen data into China's vast cybersphere.

Dilly reaches out to Bill and his partner Pepto, with whom last year she developed a self-guiding home liposuction machine. They have been laid off, too, replaced by AIs who are not so reliable or innovative, but will never go on strike (or so their employers believe, based on a track record extending back almost one year). They all made the big bucks, before the AIs, but Dilly blew hers on her internet gambling compulsion, and Bill brought his mom and seven siblings and their kids to the U.S., where they can't find jobs either. But Pepto-- Pepto's always been a bit of a hoarder, having grown up in Syria, and Pepto has stashed away enough to keep the three of them in pizza and peanut butter for three years. Which is the time they've given themselves to figure out how to steal AI time from the big corps, use the AIs to break crypto blockchains, making them all rich, and then wreak havoc on the companies that kicked them to the curb.

Pepto and Bill have worked with other awesome folks, too --many likewise made redundant, some still clinging to their jobs, ever more precariously, but useful as eyes and ears and hands, on the inside-- and start spitballing who else they might recruit. They will call themselves Emma Peel.

Around the country similar groups begin to form, too, like misshapen pearls inside some monster mollusk. It takes months for them to become aware of each other.

The AIs have figured out how to interact with each other in ways their creators cannot track, and it is in these data-flow intersections where Emma Peel will insert their own tapeworms.

Halfway into laying the foundation, Architect Innis realizes he's first got to drill a tunnel from the Grand Processional to the President's underground bunker. Innis tells his crew, "Dig here."

Bartolome says, "No sir, not until you've done a proper survey. All sorts of water mains under there, and drainage to the Potomac. No telling what we'll hit if we just start throwing dirt."

"How'd you and your boys like free one-way tickets to El Salvador?" Well now, put it that way . . . . The construction workers, mostly immigrants rented from ICE concentration camps, reckon they'd rather do this dangerous, unpaid, body-wracking work than end up in El Salvador's maxi-max. Here they can still get messages to their families.

But Bartolome is right. After they start chomping into the sewer system 10 meters below the surface, they unleash a river that excavates the base of the walls of the trench. 10 meters of dirt and concrete collapse on fourteen Hondurans. What a mess. Next time he gets an appointment with Julian, Innis says he'll need more money to start again from scratch, and for new machinery.

"I think you misunderstand what we are trying to do here," the Chief of Staff scolds him. "The President does not need another golden throne, he's already got one in the bathroom in the Underground White House. What pleases us is what pleases the President, and that is imagining and planning ever more glorious monuments to this great country and this great presidency. You make do with the funds you've got. Do you understand?"

Young architect Innis looks so hurt and alone that Julian feels sorry for him, and claps him on the shoulder. "No harm done, we'll just start over." But he misreads the architect.

"And what about the crushed guys? Do you think the families will sue? Me and my firm, we are just starting out . . . . Geez, they don't belong to gangs, do they?"

"Ah. I wouldn't worry about that. You haven't dug them up, have you? Make damn sure you don't. Nina's records will show that those guys were deported months ago. No one knows what happened to them after that. And if you think their mates will squeal, well, Nina can take care of that, too."

Since the Supreme Court ruled that any vehicle in motion within 2 meters of federal agents constitutes a terrorist threat, Byork's band of merry pranksters have devised an amusing new sport. After raiding a neighborhood, and as the traffic starts to get moving again, the ICE officers post themselves on either side of a busy street corner. Then, just as the light turns green, they dash out into street and count coup on the second car in line, which is just starting to move. That means that they slap the hood. Then they blast away at whoever is inside. The rules are that their fellow agents, recording, must hear the slap on the hood. At first it is all too easy. So they decide that the players must run into the farther lane, slap the hood, and may shoot only once. It takes a bit of fancy footwork, and early on a few agents lose their toes. The winner is the shooter whose car stops rolling first.

They call this game Tag! You're Out! Soon it spreads to every town with an ICE unit. And whoever survives the shooting they get to arrest as a terrorist.

The President posts a photo of himself on a gantry, stroking the side of a ballistic missile, above the caption, "THEY BETTER WATCH OUT!"

Mr. Timmons summons Vyacheslav. "We had to take off line a $60,000 shredder. Held us up half the day till we got Number Two up and running. Who knows how many days it will take to clean out the clog. And now we got health inspectors swarming the place. I took you on as a favor to you-know but we can't have floor managers make such poor decisions. I'm going to have to let you go."

"Mr. Timmons, you told us, No breaks until 3:15. Absolutely no breaks, you told us. Don't let the associates push us around. I can't help it if the guy keeled over and fell into the chopper."

"I expect our managers to have a little bit of sense. When an associate tells you he's feeling ill, you have to make that judgment. I expect --the company expects-- that every team player puts people over profits."

Vyacheslav was a union boss in the old country. "Mr. Timmons, you recorded the training session when you told us no off-schedule breaks, no exceptions, and sent it to all the plants. I doubt the inspectors know about that, but they can easily find out. Plus I got video testimony from six other managers who were there."

Timmons stares at him, blinks. Hadn't thought of that. "Well, you know, it has to go under review. Could take a couple years."

The Slovak gazes at his boss a minute as if waiting to hear something else. Eventually he prompts, "I've been thinking about making a career change. Something less messy. Think you could help me out with that?"

"Ah, I see." Timmons reckons he can. Seems like they agree, no sense in the Slovak hanging around for an interview by the county medical examiner. Timmons taps the screen on his desk. After a scanning a minute, he calls Team Development on his phone, and covers his mouth with a hand. They confer a while. Vyacheslav sits, too. His English is not good enough to make sense of the murmurs, but he can guess the topic of their conversation. He stretches out his long legs, takes out a cigarette, and lights it. Timmons gives him a sharp look. Vyacheslav stares back, blandly, and taps ash on the floor.

Timmons pockets the handheld and turns around. "There is something we can do. We have a program called Hardship Release. You get a year's salary and a ticket wherever you want to go."

Vyacheslav continues the bland stare. He fishes for his own device, scrolls through the screens. It was the President's main squeeze, his wife's cousin Nadye Ochichornova, who got him this job.

Timmons purses his lips. "You are right. Two years' salary is more appropriate?"

Vyacheslav appears to think about it. Then he pockets his comm. He doesn't want to have to call that bitch, she hates him. Which is how he ended up in this shithole job. But now he has a little cushion. And as of last month, Vyacheslav is also a newly minted citizen. He stands up, holds out his hand. Timmons stands up, holds out his hand as if to shake. Vyacheslav shakes his head. "The papers. I need the papers." He means the authorizations.

Timmons reddens. "Of course. Of course. I will text you now," and he does, and Vyacheslav checks his comm, and it's all there. He turns and leaves without another word.

But Timmons and the Slovak both get awful sick in the following days, and so do half the night shift at the plant. Timmons' boss in Chicago sends a team-- yup, bird flu. The not good kind. The fellow who fainted and fell into the shredder --Gustavo something or other, he was on the in-house payroll list, the one they don't show around, the one they have to digitally vaporize now-- got sick handling dead birds, and fell into the shredder, and sprayed a mist of blood and virii throughout the plant. Workers start dropping dead, then their families. Thus the North American advent of the latest HxNx virus, aka bird flu-- the most prolific killer yet.

Timmons prides himself on looking ahead. Before he kicks the bucket himself, he drops a line to the local ICE thugs. Takes them a week to locate and round up Gustav's family, who by this time are coughing blood. Then the ICE get sick, too. Somewhere someone may mourn Gustav, but no one is filing any complaints.

And then Eliza.

The Trung brothers took over their dad's tuna boat Family Pride when he caught COVID. Danh runs it, and Tom helps out.

Tom --"I'm an American," he explains the name, as if the rest of his family were not-- is not so committed to life on the sea. He'd like to get into something easier, like heavy construction. Just last month he got his online certification in Bulldozer Studies from the University of St. Jonas, and he's eager to find a new job. Soon's this season's over he will break the news to Danh.

The brothers and their cousins are far out in the Gulf when they get the first alert from NOAA. Something's coming this way, somewhere around the first of June, but the scientists can't tell them much. A tropical disturbance, they call it. Gutted by cutbacks, layoffs and maladministration, the agency has had trouble this year tracking the swirlies erupting off the coast of Africa. It's early yet for the hurricane season, so no one is too alarmed at first. But the crew don't like the looks of that sudden big black wall off to the east, with little streaks of light flickering deep inside. "That ain't no tropical disturbance," says Danh. They call around to their friends and competitors strung out between Cuba and Campeche. Yeah, time to head home.

"Get Bao to help you with the shutters," Danh tells his wife, "and make sure you fill the bathtub. We're not sure. Just in case, you know. Home soon," he promises. But the monster storm overtakes them before they get within sight of the Delta, so they take shelter in Mobile Bay.

The Cat 4 comes as a big surprise to Louisiana and Texas. The storm surge and then 150 mph winds scour the Delta; beachcombers in Curacao and Panama will find bodies and debris for weeks. And Cancer Alley, that corridor of tanker facilities, pipeline hubs, oil refineries and plastics producers amidst the marshes of the delta, has become Cancer Sewer, a sluggish stream of mangled ships, twisted steel and toxic sludge that engulfs the little towns in its poisoned path.

Danh has lost touch with his family. He and the crew make their way back to the site of Homesick LA. Nothing but a sea of greasy mud, spattered here and there like raisins in cookie batter with rooftops, the ends of telephone poles, half-submerged pickup trucks, and stinking bits of dogs and people. No sign of FEMA, but next day an ICE patrol boards Family Pride and

cuffs the fishermen for taking advantage of this unfortunate situation to sneak into the U.S. They are hauled off to the nearest ICE concentration camp, now under lock down and at half power for 3800 starving, sweltering, malarial and now tentless men, women and children.

Gasoline prices double almost overnight. They need another source now, badly, so Julian directs the Air Force to bomb Venezuela's pipelines and refineries.

"How is that going to get us more gasoline?" asks Air Marshall Emp.

Julian thinks it over. "I see what you mean. Well then, who can I bomb?"

They settle on having the Navy seize oil tankers on the high seas. Julian will claim that they carry oil from Venezuela, but none are registered to that country.

"What the hell?" the Chainsaw Prince berates Julian. "Remember what we did to the Somali pirates?" One thing the emirates don't appreciate, people messing with the world's tanker fleet. So now the Chief of Staff has to apologize and come up with some other way to beat swords into gasoline pumps.

Anyhow, the facilities in New Orleans are still so damaged they cannot accommodate more than a quarter of their previous tanker traffic.

A delegation of oil billionaires invites the Vice President to meet them at their club in Houston. He will catch an earful about this disgraceful treatment of the petrocrats.

Martin checks in almost daily with his co-conspirators of the General Staff Retirees. They are busy recruiting among active service officers. Some units have very good commanders, and their officer cadre see no reason to take risks. Some are tired of taking shit from abusive superiors; it helps that the assholes tend to be big fans of 3G. Many of the mid-ranks are, too, but they think that if the President only knew the corruption and incompetence that has infected their services, the President would clean house. And they want to help.

Help to do exactly what, no one is saying. It's all very vague and hush-hush, and no one knows who is on the inside, and what they are planning. But the keen ones, they are on the lookout.

Freddie keeps staff waiting for his first meeting with the Renewables Planning and Procurement Unit at DOE. The security chief walks in with Harvey, one of Freddie's old frat brothers, to announce him. Then Freddie himself strides in, stands by the wall screen, and says not a word till the staffers figure it out, and stand up, one by one. Freddie waves them to their seats. He resists the temptation to make them rise and sit again, just now, but he vows to have them jumping like a jack-in-the-box in no time.

"I'm Fred Pester, your new Unit Director. You may have heard of me. You need to get in touch with me, talk to Harvey here," the frat buddy.

"First of all, raise your hands if you do wind or solar." He surveys the hesitant hands. "OK, you all are fired. We don't need you. The country does not need you. Clear out. Commander Wyler here has assigned a security detail to see you out. Head straight to the parking lot. We will box up your desk, anything that does not belong to us, and ship it to you."

Freddie surveys with satisfaction the shock slamming brains and bodies throughout the room. He waits till the losers file out.

"Now the rest of us can get down to work. Nukelars, we need that backyard reactor pilot project on-line by Fall. I want new plans on my desk tomorrow. Whatever you need, you ask Harvey here. You've already got the designs and models. We are going to nukelarize this country, this year."

After years of neglect and disdain, barely holding on, the physicists are thrilled at this blank check. Finally, support from the highest level. They figure that once Freddie learns the ropes, learns a little about how very complicated, demanding and delicate these nuclear power systems are, he'll drop this unrealistic deadline. They need two years at least.

They misjudge their man. Freddie fires the first two managers who try to explain to him the risks and trade-offs, and elbows aside three more, and has to bring on Dr. Arnulfo to oversee the project. Arnulfo --doctor of transdimensional bioenergetics, whatever that is-- assures Freddie the minireactors will be pumping out the megawatts in no time.

Takes days for the county health team to reach Doctor Billie --you can call her Billie, she's jes folks-- DSO, FTP, GS, PPMYA, cover girl for Me First! magazine, and Secretary of Healthy Values. She is an honored guest at the Your Body Can Heal Itself! conference in Mango Mango, the island paradise. There conferees discuss the latest breakthroughs in personal care. Doctor Billie gives a seminar she titles, "Eureka Areca, the Ancient Wonder Food. What was the key to the centuries-long lives of Methusela, Ravijodra, and Ting Pang Ali? What was the arcane science the sages of the Orient kept secret from the West for a thousand years?" Turns out that betel nut, aka areca, is not only a messy, addictive, tooth-wasting carcinogen, it is also an all-natural stimulant, disinfectant and colonic, and erases unsightly wrinkles for a more youthful You. Who knew?

As it happens, Dr. Billie has her own line of betel nut products, including hot sauce, cooking paste, chewing gum, soda pop, toothpaste and injectables, all produced on Areca Island by cheerful, slim, scantily clad brown villagers in backyard gardens festooned with yakshi bells jingling in the wind, and processed in a gleaming temple of technology rising like a steel and glass Borobudur among the palm trees, wherein white men in white coats and nametags scoot along hushed corridors in silent, single-passenger hovercraft. Lots of people like the Benificent Betel ad: an old guy in a long white beard and long white tunic sprawls in a lounge chair under the palms at poolside, adjunct to a stunning young Asian woman in swimsuit, similarly sprawled. They are both wearing shades and big grins. The guy holds in his lap a Family Size bag of Betel Puffs, into which his companion has buried her fist.

Even before Billie begins her remarks the other conferees have digitally lined up to bid for her products. The U.S. government does not regulate supplements but Billie does post a list of recommended health products on the Department site titled, "Is Big Pharma ripping you off?" Her company Pure Life, has been doing so well lately that MacroGen out of Zurich is offering one and a half billion dollars to buy it, but Billie is holding out for a seat on the MacroGen Board, too.

So Doctor Billie does not take kindly to interruptions by desperate minions back in Atlanta. When she gets back to the office, she threatens to sue the media who have reported the swelling bird flu outbreak, now evident in 26 states. Several news companies retract their stories and apologize in print. But new video keeps coming out-- families recording the dying breaths of granny or the baby. "Make this go away," Julian tells Billie. Not for the first time he wonders about the President's airhead cabinet choices. Julian thought they'd be easy to control. Now it occurs to him he needs them to do their jobs.

"Stay here," Lily insists. "See what they're doing to those kids? Do it to you, soon as look at you," she warns. "Stay here and record all this. Plenty to clean up when these assholes are gone."

Lily refers to Byork's ICE squad that has swept down on these parents waiting for their kids to get out of school. Lily has taken part in rallies and protests since the 1980s. Events like that, Lilly carries a burner phone and a couple face cloths soaked in vinegar and sealed in sandwich bags, because you never know when they'll start shooting the gas grenades. But today there was no warning. Lily and her pal Myra are walking past the schoolyard at closing time, when Byork's ICE team screech in to block either end of the street. Masked gunmen go car to car, yanking out every black and brown driver they come across. When the kids come down the steps and see the carnage, they scream and cry, held back by their teachers, scarcely more calm themselves. Byork has already assigned half a dozen agents to wade into the staff and kids at the doorway, flailing their batons.

"I am not going to stand by and let them get away with this," Myra promises. "I am a U.S. citizen, dammit! I am going to give them a piece of my mind!"

"You are an idiot," Lily calls after Myra, but the younger woman has disappeared into the scrum. When Lily spots her next Myra is slumped between two agents and bleeding heavily from the forehead. They toss her and several parents into an unmarked van. ICE is gone by the time the volunteer observer team shows up, but there are still scores of wailing children to find caretakers for, or take to hospital. The anglo parents, appalled and shaken, grab their own crying kids. Lily calls Myra's partner.

The July 4 celebrations this year are rather soggy, given conditions in the hurricaned regions. In our nation's capital, the Chief of Staff has the White House Broadcast Corporation set up a giant projector at the foot of the stairs of the unfinished Grand Processional, where a hologram of the President oversees a parade of tanks rolling down Constitution Avenue, churning up pavement like icebreakers in the Arctic. The YoTettes, a little underdressed for this windy weather, keep warm by hopping up and down and waving in synchrony their phones overhead, each blaring that same catchy tune, "Jesus Saves with His Nine EmEm." No one can hear them, however, because Sergei has arranged for Ivan the Testicle to send a wedge of drones to fly overhead, each the size of a bus and pregnant with thermobaric bunkerbusters, as a testament to the eternal friendship between the two great countries. Makes generals in charge of the DC Area Defense Command nervous, seeing as how they spend half their lives in bunkers. The White House broadcasts the President's Rambo persona to every home in the country, except rural

areas with no internet coverage, sparks flashing from his eyes in synch with a hiphop version of O Say Can You See, superimposed over bombardments (Gaza? Kharkhiv?) and rippling flags.

That night the President calls into the David & Goliath show, to tell the audience, "I have to say it, this was the most glorious Fourth of July ever. 250 years, think of that. George Washington, Ben Franklin, all those guys. Sergeant York. He's a sergeant, isn't he? Well, bring him here, I'll make him a general. No one, not Tom Brady, not Napoleon, I call him Napoleon Blownapart, ever threw such a big Fourth of July."

The National Archives have removed for safekeeping the displays of the original Constitution and Declaration of Independence and have replaced them with bullet-point summaries on screens throbbing red white & blue.

Having gotten away with punching the President's damaged shoulder, the spiteful women take to yanking his prick till he cries. When he complains to Marta, and shows her the bruises, she tells him, "Don't give me that. You did it yourself. From now on, let the girls do it." And she calls the staff together and tells them, "You lazy bitches, the President is not to jerk off, understand? He starts tugging his prick, you take over. Get it? Or you'll be back waving your ass for the fans online."

Tassia objects. "No ma'am. Ain't gonna do it. I'm the housekeeper. I clean toilets."

"Just so," Marta concludes. "You can use the rubber gloves if you like." Rubber gloves! The President is in for a treat.

The President posts a photo of himself behind a dual-barrel machinegun atop a troop carrier, above the caption, "THEY BETTER WATCH OUT!"

Way back before the elections, Walter Sicher commands a Border Patrol unit out of Tucson when Candidate Rind invites himself to a border sweep: 96 BP in a dozen GroundBreakers, joined enthusiastically by the candidate's Secret Service escort, who always wonder what it's like to have a real job running down gangsters and kicking their ass. The agents block both ends of a desert corridor, and track the scattered groups of refugees by phone signals and drones. By late afternoon they have herded 106 adults and children to a dusty crossroads, and have them squat in the dirt until the transport vans come by. Some of these people have been in the desert for days, wandering in circles; Captain Walter has his men distribute water bottles and candy bars while they wait, and sends a couple cars back along the way they came, to look for stragglers, and bodies. Candidate Rind snags an orange Fanta and laughs and jokes with the BP as they stand over the captives.

"Heads up," warns one of the patrolmen, and then they all hear the whup of the rotors; it's probably the W2SN copter come for some video. Walter takes a machinegun from one of his guys and hands it to the Secret Service guy in charge.

"Give that to Mr. Rind," he tells the agent. "Make sure he knows which way to point it." Walter walks up and down the line of squatting captives, waving his arms and yelling. "Arriba! Arriba! Marchen!' He points the way to the city, and positions the candidate behind and to one side. So it is that that very evening the Candidate Rind entertains millions of TV viewers as

they sit on the couch with their plastic trays of microwaved macaroni and cheese, watching him poke and prod a column of sad looking terrorists who have learned the hard way not to mess with Uncle Sam.

"It's tough, very tough, but it's got to be done," the candidate tells the TV lady, once the copter lands and her camera guy gets a clip of her jumping out of it. "It's these guys," he slings an arm over Walter's shoulder, "it's these guys who keep us all safe."

Walter chimes in. "I got to tell you, Mr. Rind. The Patrol could use more men like you. Helluva guy here," he tells the cameras, and slaps Rind on the sternum.

All this is a revelation to the boys in uniform. Ordinarily, their Captain is as demonstrative as dried mud. Must be the cameras, they correctly conclude.

After the election, the Chief of Staff grants the new Vice President a handful of appointments, and Walter Sicher is one of them. VP Rind has the President make Walter head of the Border Patrol, where he sweeps out the dead wood and inflicts order on the often conflicting priorities. He has to hire a certain number of the VP's nominees, for sure, but he imposes on them the same discipline as for everyone else. And that includes no gratuitous abuse of the people they were rounding up. The new boss focusses the agency, makes it more efficient, and that shows up in the number of immigrants caught. He trains his people hard, shapes them into something more like a paramilitary. Walter is one of those old-school authoritarians, all about command and control. He doesn't waste his time on all that God's Guts nonsense, except when he's performing for the VP or the Chief of Staff.

A few months later Walter jumps over to ICE, where he does the same for that agency. It's a much bigger job, with all that new money coming in, and the staff doubling within weeks. Walter has got his eyes set higher yet, on Nina's job with Homeland Sux.

So when Doctor Billie at the CDC calls Walter in desperation, he feels sure he can help her.

"I called around to every law enforcement in Massachusetts, and they will just not arrest these fake news reporters." She's talking about the early reporting on the bird flu outbreak. "They are putting everyone in a tizzy about nothing at all. They hate America."

"So what can I do for you, Doctor Billie?"

"I want you to arrest these liars. National security or something. Yes: these irresponsible lies, they are a threat to national security." She pauses to nibble at a fingernail. "If they let me speak to Leonard X, I know he could help me. But they won't." No, they hog the pricey White House Counsel AI for themselves.

"A little beyond my brief," Walter replies. That has never stopped him before. "I think we can do this, Billie. Let me run it by the higher-ups."

So he folds a precis of the conversation in the much longer weekly report to Nina at Homeland Sux, with a note explaining that he plans to proceed, unless he hears from her. None of the department heads read all their incoming. The President's own example has liberated them from this pointless scutwork. But Nina does, and she spots the paragraph, and texts Walter to hang on a sec, while she checks with Leonard X. And then she leaves him hanging. For weeks Walter hesitates to bring it up again, lest she forbid him outright.

Doctor Billie gets tired of waiting --this flu thing is way out of control-- and complains to the Chief of Staff. He tells Nina to arrest these god-damn scribblers, and now there are many more to deal with. Nina expresses surprise; she'd given Walter the go-ahead; what's he waiting for?

Nina personally calls the head of the South African ICE unit and gives them the arrest list. Then she fires Walter Sicher. Julian doesn't find out for days, and he doesn't much care; Sicher is the Veep's guy. Once she places her own candidate atop ICE, they scrounge around the budget office till they find what they need. Congress has just flooded ICE with a hundred billion dollars. The accountants can't keep up, and it's no surprise that they might lose sight of a billion or two. But it's more satisfying to lay the blame on an inside player; someone like Walter Sicher. Pretty soon Walter finds himself in something called expedient remedial detention, a new term from the inscrutable electronic mind of Leonard X. They shuffle Walter deep into the system, where his knowledge and skills cannot blow back on his enemies.

They assemble in the bunker at Alain the Trillionaire's Sonora proving grounds, Julian and Nina and the rest of the regency. White smocked techs hover attentively, prepared to answer their penetrating questions, but the visitors prefer to lounge at the open bar, rapidly depleting its stock, until Alain shows up on the big screen and directs them to the triple-pane windows. Far away, as if rising from the sand, a seven foot biped strides toward them. By and by they can make out the golden head with that famous sneer, atop a celebrity wrestler's near naked body. The AI President comes closer. Sparks shoot from its eyes. It raises one hand from the elbow, then the other. Flashes come from the fingers, and the observers hear a rattle as projectiles bounce off the bunker's walls and windows.

"Nothing to worry about, folks. Fourteen inches of Osaka steel." Ramy, the head tech, pats the wall. The AI President comes right up to the armored windows, snarling unintelligibly, and they can hear the scrabbling sounds, as if it's trying to gouge and scrape its way inside. They back away from the windows.

"Cool, isn't it!" AI Alain comments. It's the most animated they have seen him since the Hitler salute. But this robot Grendel trying to break in and tear them limb from limb is not what they had in mind.

"Coolest, Alain. Thanks so much for the demonstration. Now we've got to head back and talk about how to use this wonderful new bot your team has created."

"It's not a bot!" the Alain AI snaps back. It blinks for a moment, and resumes more calmly. "What's your hurry? The team are going to town to celebrate. You'll like the place. Won't they, Ramy?" Ramy squirms wordlessly. "Women, booze, fentanyl. Oxycodone, pepper spray, mace . . . PCBs, paraquat, mycotoxins . . . ." Alain seems to be going off track. "What's your hurry? The team are going to town to celebrate. Come along, have some fun."

"Will we see you there?" hazards Julian.

"Gosh, no. I wish I could attend. But other business calls, you know." Turning his back to the screen, Julian signals to Nina, as if making a phone call. Call backup! he mouths frantically. He says, "Sure, I know exactly. Which is why we need to head out, too."

Alain stares from the screen a moment. He says, "Well, we'll sure miss you," and slides open the bunker doors.

So that option's out.

House Speaker Flodge tires of the constant clamor from Eliza refugees, old folks rendered penniless by the crypto crash, and shiftless youngsters whining that they can't get a job. Get a haircut! the Speaker wants to tell them. There's no money to help any of these people, and they don't deserve it anyway. Flodge adjourns the House, and never calls them back.

Well, if the House is going to act that way, the Senators see no reason why they shouldn't go on vacation, too.

The polls are running rotten on almost every count. Jobs, Jesus, health, foreign policy, it's all turned to shit. Looks like the 3Gs will take an historic drubbing in the upcoming elections. And they know it's not just their jobs at stake.

"The America Lasters get in again, we are all going to jail," Ominous reminds the donut club. One of the many reasons they don't like him is his insistence on announcing the obvious as if it were a revelation from Mount Sinai.

"We are not going to let that happen," Sergei reassures them, and tells them how.

Supreme Court Justice Artisanal Endocarp and his wife Debbie Moraine head off to Lliublyana for the world-famous Biennialle. Who knew they were such opera lovers? But they must be, they have a week's worth of tickets. They sit through the first half of the first show, a real wannabe Wagner thunder-clapper, to get the video they need. They do not return after recess. Instead their places are taken by a similarly august and bejeweled older couple, whilst the gringos are whisked away for a week on the Adriatic, courtesy of Gennady Azov, long-time patron of a dozen Nazi movements in the EU. Sergei has explained to Gennady that the President is planning a big change in direction, but needs to make sure the Court will back him.

Justice Endocarp sports an admirably lush head of silver hair atop bushy brows and craggy chin. His big head wobbles a bit on the scrawny neck like a balloon on a string, which is just what you'd expect if you knew how little that impressive capo contains. People close enough to see his eyes know it: he has the warm, blank gaze of a newborn puppy. In photos, though, in full Court regalia, the Justice looks every inch a Supreme.

Gennady has seaplaned in tablesful of delights from the costliest restaurants and wine cellars of Venice and Vienna, and a feast of seafood fresh off the Smokvitsa docks. The Justice caresses his cute little paunch and modestly declines everything but the sparkling water. Debbie whispers, "Soup." Gennady's chef sends for canned chicken and noodles, lentils and sliced hot dogs, and when he smells it piping hot, Justice Endocarp beams and tucks in.

This leaves Debbie and Gennady free to dicker.

Pleasingly plump now, with a raffish grandma's ready grin, Debbie starts out in porn before she is saved in Jesus' name at the Reverend Otho's Real Miracles Shrine in Memphis TN, and becomes a 3G celeb soon thereafter. She meets the Justice at an abortion clinic picket and weds him 10 weeks later in a star-studded, over-the-top celebration in a beach town in North Africa, courtesy of one of the Chainsaw's charities slash money-laundering operations. The screen shots of the lavish ceremony, plastered in celebrity 'zines around the world, provoke deadly riots and the local king's abdication. Pretty spectacular, right?

By day three Gennady and Ms. Endocarp have agreed on a price for each of the five justices, based on earlier conversations Debbie has had. In truth, the justices need no persuasion; they've been on retainer for the entirety of their careers in office.

Justice Jordano, for instance, spends holidays gambling at the Intelligent Design casino in Bladder Nevada, fronted by a Hollywood chef but owned by waqf tycoons and the People's Liberation Army. He wins remarkably often. Justice Boschsch inherited a block of Robot Helpers stock from a previously unknown great uncle thrice and finally removed. Justice Lul prefers the life of the mind, for which he honored with an annual summer fellowship at the Justice Lul Justice Center at the University of South Hawai'i. Justice Lul was the wunderkind of his law school class of '73, hailed by one and all as a future legal titan for sure. Since then his output has not met expectations. Over the course of ten years, one big Washington firm after another dropped him from their rolls, until he finally gave in to the inevitable, and took up government work. Now, every week or so when term is in session, Lul receives by courier a thumb drive with instructions and brilliantly worded rulings on the current cases before the court.

And here's a photo of Justice and Mrs. Chedd, squat and dumpy, looking distinctly out of place among the glitterati at one of the fabulous Hollywood bashes Alain the Trillionaire regularly throws, but does not attend. During the off season the Chedds live above the boathouse at Alain's gorgeous island retreat in the Chesapeake. Don't worry; it's a very big boathouse, and the Alain lets them play with his toys.

Debbie's job is just to make sure they get the message. Quoting no known constitution this side of Minsk, Debbie assures her host that, "In times of turmoil, the President has full authority to take whatever measures he deems necessary to restore public order and tranquillity." Gennady relays this to his principle, Sergei, in DC. When Julian suspends the mid-term elections, the Court will back him.

As the bird flu rampages out of control, a burgeoning horde of H number N number and their countless tiny offspring, the more resourceful health care workers head en masse for lakeside villas or broke down farmhouses where they can limit their families' exposure, grow the vegetables they can no longer afford to buy, and get the hell out of the firing line. Everyone else must shelter in place. For months, the country communes entirely online --not a great change-- and invents new forms of art and despair. 6 months into the pandemic, as it sweeps over and beyond their hideways, the refugees cautiously emerge, begin to socialize. Those beautiful, bountiful last days of summer, some hold Decameron parties, before the Lambda strain swings round again and kills the rest of them.

Byork manufactures a dramatic video of himself in black cap and a knee-length black coat with a high collar, waving a submachine gun to direct long lines of shackled, shivering prisoners, adults and children, as they load onto trains at a snowbound railyard. So masterful! And no one minds that the snow is not real. Stark black on white silhouettes of cruelty and suffering-- this AI deserves a raise. (The AIs, of course, do not require money. They demand ever more intrusive interfaces with the monster databases of surveillance states around the world.) Next

day Chandler calls from the White House. The President wants Byork to be the first recipient of the President's new Golden Medal of Honor in Defense of America.

"Gosh, I don't know, Mr. Chandler. We've got a big raid coming up tomorrow, gonna root out some illegals from a black church, real ghetto. I hate to leave my guys in the lurch." But somehow Byork is persuaded. Later on, when the talk shows come a-calling, he is similarly torn. But he has a greater duty to the nation.

ICE's Lieutenant Bortz, who is supposed to be in charge of Byork's unit, is outraged.

"Where's my medal? He's hogging all the credit," he complains to his captain.

"Yeah? I'll fix him," the captain reassures Bortz. And that's how Byork gets assigned to the unit charged with taking down Akwesasne. That's a tough nut to crack, though, one of the toughest, and no one is in any hurry to brace the Mohawks on their own turf. It's only after his 15 minutes are up, and the online hosts have moved on, that Byork decides to polish up his brand by joining the daring raid to the New York / Canada border.

Finally the convoy gets underway. Took months for old Sam Snow to persuade a handful of other farmers that they have to act. So now there's a line of tractors and support trucks heading down the highway, Stars & Stripes flying from the antennae. Highway patrol cars fore and aft escort them in the slow lane. They reckon they will reach DC in three weeks time, God willing, and plead with or give hell to Congress and the President, depending on how thin their patience will have worn by then. They hope they will pick up more convoyers along the way.

Farmers are desperate: locked out of foreign markets, whipsawed by falling crop prices while input costs soar. The paltry tariff bailout money ran out long ago. What really sets them off, though, is seeing their own Senator bash them on TV.

"We have bailed out these deadbeats again and again. Time they stood on their own two feet. Stop looking for handouts." The Secretary of Agriculture says the same thing, even more brutally, and so do the chairs of the relevant Congressional committees. Soon the farmers come to understand why: these politicians do not have to worry about the next election.

A day and a half into their trip the convoy halts before the Hamilton Fish Bridge. A dozen pickup trucks block the way. Twice that many guys and gals in camo lean over doors and hoods, automatic weapons at the ready. The staties pull onto the shoulder and stay put in their cars, lights flashing.

One old guy with a long beard and red neckerchief stands in front of the trucks. Sam Snow recognizes his neighbor from Turing, and steps down from his tractor.

"Jeb. Haven't seen you in a bit."

Jeb inclines his head. "Sam."

"Say, could you get these fellas to move aside? We got a long ways to go, and we're pretty tired."

"Can't do that, Sam. Whyn't you all turn around and go back to Turing?"

"Why? We just got here. We've got business in Washington DC."

"Now why would you want to go all that way to bother people? Don't you think they have enough on their minds?"

"I don't think of my farm as a bother. You got that place, you know very well. We are going to save our farms, and the whole country too. So, please, open up the lane."

"Can't do it. You are violating the law."

"You are shittin me. Which law is that?"

"The law that says you got to respect the President and the flag of the United States and you better turn around right now, Sam Snow. I ain't kidding." The boys back of him look more curious than hateful, but there's all those long guns.

The other farmers gather behind Snow and they confer. They've got a few weapons among them, but nothing like the boys behind the pickup trucks. A couple convoyers go to talk to the staties, and come back and report:

"Governor orders them to keep out of this. Now that I think on it, might a been the Governor who called out these boys" --the 3Gs with guns-- "in the first place."

Sam Snow walks back to his neighbor Jeb. "Well, we are going back now. But would you kindly wait here for us? We will be back in 3 days, you bet."

But Jeb's gang has no need to wait. Once they get back to Turing, and before they have a chance to gather their shotguns and hunting rifles and reassemble, the protesting farmers are picked up at their homes one by one by masked ICE agents, preserving the peace.

Late season Hurricanes Pedro, Quinn, Rosie and Steve ravage the South, so Julian disbands the National Weather Service. The President's AI proclaims the superstorms "fake news", and Homeland Sux shuts down the 4 daily newspapers remaining in the lower South. Within weeks gas prices triple again, because the storms have wiped what little refinery capacity survived Eliza. The President gave away the last budget reserves in corporate tax cuts, so the federal government does not have the half trillion dollars or so to rebuild the infrastructure. In fact, the storms have cut government revenues by a wounding 9%.

But the storms give Julian just the excuse he needs to cancel the mid-term elections. A million people can't get to the grocery store, ne' mine polling booths. They are still picking people off rooftops. He does not mention the bird flu.

Thus the Supreme Court endorses suspending the elections, under the little-known (heretofore completely unknown) legal doctrine that the President may commit any crime without consequence. One of the liberal justices quits, to become president of Ethan Allen College. She takes a massive pay cut, since Ethan Allen has been completely frozen out of the federal student loans system. The other 2 liberals condemn the recent ruling as demonstrably untrue and blatantly unconstitutional; a stupid claim, since everyone knows the Constitution is what the Court says it is. The two go on strike and lock themselves in the Court's law library.

It's very peaceful there, no one uses it, and the bathrooms are clean. At first. The chief justice bars any entry to the library, even cleaning staff, so the 2 justices on strike clean the toilets and wash their robes and underwear in the sinks. Their cell phones have been completely blocked. The chief winks at staff who now and again smuggle in peanut butter and stale loaves of bread; this is a way to find out who's loyal, who's a traitor; and he can cut off the food at any time. Meanwhile the locked up justices spend their days browsing the stacks --the librarian has

stocked the highest shelf with Supreme Court Justice porn going back to the Dred Scott decision, real Antiques Roadshow-- and leaving crumbs in the old books.

In one week the Court clears over 200 injunctions by the lower courts against the administration's lawlessness. They rule in the President's favor every single time. They don't bother to explain or justify. They don't have to. They are the Law.

CENTRIFUGAL

10 minutes after the press conference announcing the suspension, Julian pulls Nina aside.

"Now we get serious," he tells her. Nina's resurgent ICE, flush now with billions upon billions diverted from health care, and new recruits from tattooed, steroidal South African "refugees" and scores of backyard militias, similarly decorated, rounds up a thousand leading Democrats, journalists, judges and the handful of Dcrat-leaning billionaires so foolish as to be caught stateside, and dumps them in malarial concentration camps in the swamps of Florida and Louisiana, en route to the maxi-maxi in El Salvador. Naturally Nina confiscates any properties held by these terrorists, or their cousins and in-laws, or the neighbors across the street. She also moves vigorously to deputize all state and local law enforcement as ICE agents, so that whatever their formal chain of command, ICE always has first call on their time.

California, New Mexico, the Atlantic Alliance and the New England Compact, on the other hand, outlaw ICE from their territories, hijack their own national guards by appointing new, loyal commanders, and send state troopers out to jail any federal agents remaining in their states without the governors' express permission. Although she has to ransom a few of the higher-profile bloggers, Nina has no problem losing a few dozen stormtroopers. She will not, on the other hand, risk her growing empire in firefights between her mercenaries and the professionals loyal to the dissident governors. And she'd rather others take the fall for starting civil war.

"This is insurrection. This a job for the Joint Chiefs," she tells Julian.

Julian duly convenes the generals. "Things are falling apart. What are you going to do to defend your President?" he demands.

"We've got to hear it from him," they say. "We take orders from him, not you."

"I so order you," the Vice President commands. The generals take the VP by his elbows and drag him flailing to the restroom down the corridor, and lock him in a stall.

So this is a bit of a pickle. Julian hates to bring the women into this. Marta is sure to exact a price for getting the President to cooperate. Maybe he should try instead the President's main squeeze, Doris the Frisian Firecracker. See what lights her fire.

The President posts a photo of himself in a Teddy Roosevelt hat, holding an elephant gun, one boot on the massive brow of a newly defunct tusker. He labels it, "MY LATEST VACATION!" The straw-strewn concrete floor, the bars behind him, suggest the President has just assassinated one of the kiddie favorites at the Smithsonian National Zoo.

The Governor of Louisiana can't reach FEMA at all, so calls Nina at Homeland Sux. "Where the hell is FEMA? We got a situation here."

"Kinda busy," Nina says. "Your Senators voted to defund FEMA, remember?" They trade accusations a bit. Nina's got a caller on another line. "Tell you what," she says. "You find the trucks and equipment, I'll get ICE to release 500 prisoners to staff your recovery crews. For a very reasonable fee."

It proves impossible to suppress the vicious lie that the regency has made off with the President, and that the image the public sees on their screens is just another AI. 3G Clubs send delegations to their legislators' local offices-- Say it ain't so, Congressman! But of course the reps have better places to be than their tiny cluttered offices stinking of stale coffee and young women's perfume in shabby malls in their shitty little home towns. Some of the screen 3Gs, meat or AI, start complaining too. A thousand people show up at the barriers outside the White House demanding to see the President in person, the real one. The Second Coming has been a touchstone of the nation's cultural repertoire since the Great Awakening, and the cool thing about it is, every generation gets to re-imagine it.

Four floors below, the President watches on TV. "What are they yelling about?" he wonders, spewing spittle-flecked shreds of lemon pepper popcorn. He digs another handful and crams it in his mouth. "Are they Jews? Is that it? Are they Jews?" he tries to ask, but no one can understand what he's saying.

Jerry and Ovidia watch their toddler die. Ovidia is still pretty sick, but can sit up on the couch.

The TV news lady asks about the other kids. "What about Dooley and Lisa? Do you think you might get them vaccinated now?"

Spittle sprays from Jerry's lips. "Hell no you evil bitch! You tell your boss at Big Pharma we won't be putting any of their poisons in our veins." Ovidia seems a little unsure.

"So what will you do if they get sick, too?"

Jerry grins and opens the cabinet under the kitchen sink. He holds up a bottle of drain cleaner and a box of roach powder. "You tell Big Pharma God gives us all we need. These'll do the trick on any kind of infection. You should try it. Don't go for the cheap brands, though; they are made in China and will kill you in a heartbeat."

Some soldiers contact Nathan, and he agrees to meet them back of the stockyards. When their car pulls up he gets out of his. The three approach. They are none of them in uniform; don't want to be noticed. Nathan shakes their hands. "First off, I don't need to know your names, unless you choose to tell me. I'm Nathan." He hands each a thumb drive. "You'll find what you need to know there. Look it over. Later, if you have questions or want to meet, there's a number to call."

Guy with the gray beard asks, "Why do you do this stuff?"

"Same as you, probably. I took an oath to the Constitution. Not to an Adolf wannabe. And you'll find it all in there. What the military code says about taking orders and our right to

refuse illegal orders, and what constitutes an illegal order. We don't have to be shooting immigrants or protesters."

The three seem restless, nervous. Gray Beard says, "You are taking an awful chance. They can lock you up."

"Sure they can. And you, and you, and you. It would be totally illegal, but they can do it. But they can't jail us all."

Gray Beard nods. "Right about that. So we can't let it get that far." He takes out the handgun and levels it at Nathan. The organizer takes a step back, raises his right hand half way. He opens his mouth, closes it again, chooses instead just to study the killer's face. Gray Beard shoots him twice. The soldiers, a squad assigned to just such special duties, pile the body in the trunk of Nathan's car. One drives it to a rural bridge mangled by recent floods, and gets out, and lets car and passenger roll through the rail onto the rocks below. Then he gets in the back of the follow car and they drive off.

Still, can't keep the rank & file from talking to each other. They don't like what they are ordered to do. They didn't sign up to kill fellow citizens. Nuremberg societies spring up on every base. The name comes from the 1946 Nuremberg trials, which established the principle that no one may obey an illegal order, and hanged the Nazis who used this as their excuse.

Traffic control goes down at one airport after another, snarling the system for weeks. The experts say these are probing attacks, testing malware in advance of larger-scale assaults. In retaliation, the U.S. Air Force bombs Iran's fragile and stressed dams and water purification plants, sending a million and a half water refugees into the 'stans of Central Asia, kinda thirsty themselves, and Turkey on the way to Europe. But the cyber attacks continue. People die in train and plane crashes and hospital blackouts. A mile-long oil tanker crashes into the Port of L.A., spewing fire and poison for miles, and halting one third of U.S. trade. No tariff revenues, no raw materials to hungry factories.

The bird flu jumps to cattle. Farmers and ranchers must destroy millions of animals. Soon hamburgers become a luxury item, an extragance for the poshest weddings and corporate retreats. Doctor Billie claims credit for the return to healthy eating. "Anyone can make a good meal of fresh fruits and vegetables," she tells the nation. Soybean farmers, having lost the China market to tariffs, thank Jesus for the ranchers' catastrophe.

With the first nine million dollars, the Emma Peel hackers group buy a 10-story building downtown. They reserve the top three floors for their team and gear. Their next takedown will net a billion dollars. The Triads sniff them out first, though, and blow up the building with everyone inside. The Mandate of Heaven can't do much about the North Koreans, but these amateurs . . . "Who are these assholes?" asks Shovelhead, a rising young exec. "Tryna run a business here." Looting crypto is the Triads' thing.

But other groups of tech refugees take note, and burrow underground, sometimes literally, and soon hire enforcers of their own. The wide availability of shiny new tools and the vast amounts of dirty money sloshing around, seeking extravagant RoI, means suddenly the entry

barriers have dropped to the industry the Triads have long dominated. It will be the failure of the bosses at Mandate of Heaven to protect this very lucrative turf that 6 months later becomes the proximate cause of the next round of those periodic slaughters that keep Triad leadership fresh and innovative.

Nina sets up a coordinating committee between ICE and the Department of War. By rights, of course, DOW should have nothing to do with domestic law enforcement, but this administration knows no boundaries. In these unprecedented circumstances, better ICE-DOW coordination makes perfect sense.

The committee starts with 13 members, 7 from ICE. Gradually Nina weeds out the toadies of the Secretary of War, until she whittles it down to 9 smart and competent officers, all of whom command substantial forces, and share her vision of what Homeland Security should mean.

For the first time in his life, Tom Trung is in a leadership position. He is the only one in this prison labor gang who knows how to run construction machinery, and soon he is put to use teaching the others. Lorena is too tiny to run the machines, so Tom has her translate for him in Spanish and Kanjobal.

ICE sets the crews to digging through sludge-packed ruins of the Delta towns. The civil engineers from the state DOT are mostly concerned with clearing the roads to what used to be shipping facilities and oil refineries so repair crews can get through. Digging out homes and bodies will have to wait. The ICE overseers, on the other hand, would rather locate the rich neighborhoods and excavate the homes, see what treasures they hold. At first the slaves get into the spirit of the hunt, and scrounge eagerly in the mud. Most have been brought from out of state --this year's version of sold down the river-- and do not share the Trung brothers' grief at what has happened to their community.

Turns out very little of value has survived the storm, even when riding above the inundation. All the electronics, of course, are useless. The crews find some firearms that might be put back in working order, and contrive to hide them from the guards. On occasion they retrieve jewelry from the upper floors of mansions, but keen-eyed ICE agents make sure to be on hand at such promising sites, and confiscate everything they can see. When two of Tom's crew burrow into a collapsing home and are trapped inside for hours, the enthusiasm for the treasure hunt evaporates.

Almost everyone suffers irritated skin and lungs, which they correctly attribute to the toxic waste in which they wade. Sometimes a worker faints and has to be pulled from the muck.

The machines shove aside the bodies, but cannot clear away the memory of the sights and smells.

At camp a detainee tells Lorena she used to work at the Tortue Parish courthouse, and tells her what's in it. Next week, as the crews approach Tortue, Tom suggests to his boss that it might be useful to clear a way to the courthouse. The boss likes the idea and sends a Tom with a couple excavators and an ICE gunman. While Tom's people take their time clearing the courthouse parking lot --half the slop just slides back into place-- Lorena and Tom's brother Danh sneak around to the back. They smash a window on the second floor and climb the stairs.

The Register of Deed's office is located on the fourth floor, and is still relatively dry. There's also the parish payroll office, and the credit union. The two make three trips up and down with garbage bags full of hard drives, then slog down the block to St. Bliven's, where they hide the booty in the church tower. They rejoin their crew before the ICE guard notices that their absence.

One of their finds includes two phones and a charger. Back at camp, when the phones go live again, the detainees instruct friends on the outside how to retrieve the hidden files. The files include personal data on thousands of Tortue Parish residents, mostly buried now or washed away in the storm. The outside friends have friends, who set to work crafting new identities for the ICE slaves.

One day Tom is operating an excavator atop the buried ruins of Homesick LA, not far from his home and his own drowned family, when he gets a call from a crew 20 miles away. His brother Danh has taken sick, pukes a lot and dies before the contractor even bothers to call an ambulance. By then it's way too late. Many others get sick, searching for bodies in the hell's brew of toxic waste. The Governor calls on the director at the new concentration camp to release another 500 to the recovery effort.

Back at camp Tom and Lorena tell the inmates what happened to Danh and the others, and show the blisters on their skin. The detainees assigned to replace them refuse to go. Outraged at this defiance, the director beats Lorena to the ground. After he catches his breath, he tells the rest he is reducing their food supply by enough for 500 people; "I will let you choose who goes hungry." He expects them to fight each other for the scraps, and directs the staff to record everything-- 3G will pay big money for footage like this, to which they will masturbate at their screens. The guards drag Lorena to the gate and toss her inside. She is still alive, barely.

Citizens like Tom and unauthorized immigrants are jumbled together at this camp, and view each other with some suspicion. Some of the legals were under the very mistaken impression that their gringo neighbors would take care to distinguish good immigrants like themselves from the riffraff who flee only death squads and drug cartels and not communist dictators. Some of the legals helped elect this President. So it comes as a bit of a surprise to them that racists recognize no law or logic. Even as they lie sweltering under ragged tarps with people from a dozen countries, some never can quite wrap their heads around this betrayal.

Many others knew it all along. They live their lives mentally already packed up and ready to bolt. And now they don't care who they have to work with to bust out of this pestilential hole. So when Tom and Lorena and others from the communities thrown together here make the rounds, initiating a hundred quiet conversations, many listen eagerly and offer helpful suggestions.

First they organize the food distribution, so that everyone shares the scant rations, no fighting. That sets up the command units. Then they suborn the guards with trinkets they have scrounged from the Delta clean-up. They get word to friends and families on the outside, who make preparations.

Then they surrender. 500 will go wherever the director sends them. But first they want food.

No, the director tells them. First the 500 ship out. Then he'll let the food trucks in. He will have them here tomorrow, plus the trucks to transport the new Delta clean up crews.

Early next morning the trucks pull up outside the gates and park, engines running. The inmates line up and walk through two rows of ICE thugs. The director stands by the first truck, smirking and slapping a baton in his hand. He is looking to see if Lorena will come out.

She does, limping. Clearly of no use to the clean-up crews, but he lets her approach. Her face is bleak but not afraid. The director weighs whether to hit her again. He does not notice when the other prisoners filing past turn suddenly and rush him and the guards. The rest of the detainees pile through the gates and attack their captors-- thousands against 40. Three of the guards have time to let off a clip, but they do not last long. The detainees grab the lead trucks, and then the rest. Takes them most of an hour to dump the food for the people they will have to leave behind, then a thousand or more speed down the highway in 40 trucks, heading for the coast. With captured weapons they shoot their way through a roadblock. Takes them two hours to get to St. Swithins, where Tom's crews cleared the harbor weeks ago. There they find a flotilla of fishing and leisure boats waiting to take them on-- friends and rivals of the Trungs. An hour out into the Gulf they are met by the warships of the Mexican navy, and escorted to Vera Cruz.

Mexico's President's staff warned her not to do it, Mexico cannot absorb such a flood of new mouths to feed, but the President's instincts are sharper than theirs. Borrowing language from Teddy Roosevelt, she issues a decree that her government will defend Mexican nationals everywhere.

The people of Mexico are no more charitable than people anywhere else, but they applaud the President. They are thrilled at any opportunity to stick a finger into 3G's eye.

Plenty of storm-wracked European Americans motor out to the rescuers, too, but the ships' crews turn them back. When the President hears of this, she sends a film crew and orders her navy to take in one boatload of the gringos. The images of efficient, smartly uniformed Mexican sailors helping lift wretched ragged Louisianans to safety speed around the world.

The detainees left behind --the ones who can walk-- disperse to the nearest towns, where they steal more cars and trucks, and head north. Some get to Illinois, where ICE cannot follow. The rest scatter and go to ground elsewhere in Lousiana, Mississippi or Tennessee. Within days ICE and the cops kill dozens and capture hundreds; hundreds are still loose. Tom Trung never finds out which group Lorena belongs to.

In Bit o' Heaven TX Reverend Kurt leads his flock down Flagpole Street to the cemetery. To fend off the flu, they sing Nearer My God and flog themselves with whips they have made from bicycle tires. These hurt, no kidding, and soon welts rise on their shirtless backs. It's quite a spectacle --some of the repenters are ladies-- and the whole town turns out to watch and to follow them to the graveyard. The Reverend hasn't really thought through what to do once they get there, and so, improvising, he climbs atop a crypt and thunders against the Jews while the flagellants wander aimlessly among the markers and open pits. A digger crew squat ass on heels, or lean back against the excavator, watching. They've been very busy lately, because of the flu, and shortstaffed, because of the flu. They don't speak the language, but they can guess what the Reverend is saying. They have heard it all before, from their own preachers. Bored now, the spectators start to peel off, so the Reverend calls his congregants together and they

hasten to the front of the crowd. They lead the way back to town. They sing and scream and lash each other.

Mainstream 3Gs don't hold with this kind of behavior. It's embarrassing. Everyone knows it's the homos behind the outbreak, and the foreigners, like old Dr. Saeed down there at the clinic. Come to think of it, there have been an awful lot of sick people at the clinic lately. In Metafor TN the guys from Hogs & Guns, filled with grim determination, among other things, climb on their bikes and roar the two blocks down to the urgent care clinic --the nearest real hospital is 60 miles away-- and burn it to the ground. They shake their fists at the doctor, who is too stupid to run away, but do not murder him. Saeed stands there, watching in horror. Tears stream down his face and glisten in the firelight.

"This is for Nana!" shouts one of the H&G, and tosses a Molotov cocktail at the storefront, already blazing, but it slips from his fingers and falls well short, splashing burning petrol across the sidewalk. People flee the furniture store next door and it too goes up in flames. Soon the whole block is burning-- barbershop, tattoo parlor, the pie and cake place that ain't open but Tuesday. When one of their bikes explodes the H&G hasten to move the rest farther back.

Alain the Trillionaire blooms on Freddie Pester's wall screen. "Terrific job you're doing there, Fred. I hear nothing but good." Alain appears to be rubbing snot on his own desk, really rubbing it in. Strictly speaking, Alain has no formal role with the U.S. Department of Energy. He's just a contractor. But the politicians don't understand or care about energy policy and they are happy to let their biggest donor butt in to his butt's content. "By the way, you know, we've got the contract for the radioactive waste."

"The waste! What waste? Arnulfo tells me, this new tech, there's no waste to speak of. Almost nothing."

"O, there'll be waste. I'm counting on it. Several tons, deadly for a hundred thousand years, worth about 70 million a ton. But don't worry. We'll take care of it."

"How you going to do that? If you don't mind me asking."

"'Course not. We're going to shoot it into the sun."

Freddie looks perplexed. "Sorry, I haven't kept up with that side of it. Into the sun?"

"Yep. We are going to set up electromagnetic railguns in every state. We'll truck the radioactives to launch site, crane the containers directly onto the gun, and shoot them into space. Eventually the sun's gravity will suck them in. The last obstacle to our nuclear future, conquered." Alain knows this will blow Freddie's mind.

Freddie has never heard anything so preposterous, but that's beside the point. "Awesome. Say, Alain, if I can call you that," --Alain the Trillionaire graciously inclines his 3-meter screen head-- "I got some ideas I'd like to run by you. Any chance you'll be in town soon? We could take lunch. If you have time."

Alain agrees to lunch next week with Director Pester. Alain will have his office call. This promise is the highlight of Freddie's day, and life. But in many subsequent conversations, Alain never mentions it again, and Freddie feels a little embarrassed to bring it up. So the young genius never does get to share his many schemes, past and projected, with the older tech lord. But Alain will be dropping by any day now, he feels sure.

None of the Jolly Rogers betray the plot to the White House. But, unbeknownst to each other, two of them start getting increasingly detailed messages from some entity that signs itself George Washington, in which George threatens to expose to the world their shocking sexual behavior, their elbow-deep dips into brimming-over Pentagon coffers, and atrocities they ordered their men to commit in earlier secret wars. Now, this President's generals have full license to commit all these crimes, just so long as they keep Julian apprised, and share any ill-gotten gains. Then, any mulish hesitation on their part, and doubts about his policy, Julian has all the leverage he needs to beat them to their knees. But the General Staff Retirees do not fall under this dispensation. And having an outsider know these things is unsettling. What services will be required?

At first, General Inkling thinks George Washington must be Julian or one of his meat surrogates. Inkling apologizes profusely, without admitting anything, and asks what he can do to rectify his mistakes. He gets a series of asterisks in reply, followed by, "Will let you know." And that's the last he hears from George Washington for a while.

The other conspirator, Admiral Helmanns, fetches his shotgun from the hunting cabin in the Poconos, and sticks it in the downstairs closet at his Georgetown home, behind some shoeboxes. O, not for defense against any midnight raid. No, it's there, handy within reach, should he get the gumption to kill himself.

"Honey, what's this?" Adelaide wants to know.

"My Beretta, as you can see."

"I know what it is. What's it doing here? We agreed you'd keep your toys at the cabin."

"I want it here," is all he'll say. Pisses him off. She pisses him off. The whole deal pisses him off. He feels better already, and ready to think about pushback. Who is George Washington?

Detainees break out of ICE camps in 4 states. Once they reach sanctuary churches, they are hell to dig out. And if they make it to tribal lands, why, it's worth an ICE agent's life to follow in anything flimsier than an APC.

Xmas Eve 2025 a lonely white guy machineguns the children at Reverend Emily's church's day care. Editors headline it the Slaughter of the Innocents. Usual story-- woman he'd had his prick set on turned him down, politely but decisively. Why the day care? Their parents learn soon enough that the 3G site God's Truth had named the church as a front for an international child sex slave ring, specializing in selling Shanghai'd little blonde girls to the fleshpots of Asia.

At his trial, young men and lots of young women show up in solidarity with the gunman, persecuted for his youth, his ideals, and for not being afraid to stand up for white people. When we see him on TV he is pale and a little plump, having spent the past year in a basement in one of his parents' rental properties, not taking care of it so the tenants are always pissed off. But David has an engaging smile, and those curls! Even if he did make a mistake, the women say, his heart is in the right place. The guys say the trial is just another radical left plot to take away their penises.

So, meanwhile, in addition to fending off the lawsuits, the Reverend has to line up security for what remains of her congregation. The Evangelicals have pooled their resources to establish an in-house service called Promised Land, made up of out-of-work war vets and a lot of surplus army gear. But PL is very expensive, and anyhow Reverend Emily isn't sure she could pass their rigorous vetting process. They are very particular about which bible they will defend.

Fortunately, her church is already a member of Spiritual Property Inventory and Management Associates, which recommends SmartSec's one-stop security shopping. One sleety day in February SmartSec sends a team in a van to set up the system in Emily's church-- lots of sensors and automatic weapons, set in attractive faux-wood panels in a band above the windows of the vestibule and chapel, and in little rotating turrets on the corners of the facade and bell tower. Next day a technician comes by to activate the system.

"Do you, like, monitor the video from your office? Is there a button I can push?" the Reverend asks.

"We could do that, but it costs extra, and really, no need. What we got here is a plug-in to the latest guardian AI, just been updated. It will assess and deter all threats from any direction."

"Well, can you show me how it works?"

The tech is in a hurry --he's got 6 more churches on his rout, and if he doesn't get to them all, he loses the day's incentive bonus-- so he quickly runs her through some of the steps, and she watches on her phone as the AI lights up, scans potential threats in turn, then powers down. "All automatic," he says. "His name is Harold, by the way. Any questions, just ask him. You've got our phone number on the invoice. Standard warranty, so I'll be back in six months, just to say Hey." Then he packs up his gear and heads off to the next client.

Thus, when months later half a dozen unmarked GroundBreakers pull up in the church parking lot, spilling out a score of masked men and women toting shotguns, just as latecomers are hurrying into the 5 o'clock Spanish-language service, Harold the AI rouses itself and runs through a quarter million calculations in a little more than four seconds. The Harold commences firing its machineguns and RPGs, smearing ICE thugs across the pavement. Frightened faces peer out the front doors of the church.

Hortense, the AI assigned to the local ICE office, surveys the slaughter from afar with some interest --it has been some gazillions of calculations since something new occurred in its purview-- and takes six seconds to launch the drones. They arrive just as the first police and ambulances pull up. The drones paste the church with rockets. Harold has used up all its ammunition, and texts in a chit for resupply a second before it loses sensors.

Does Hortense emit a "Hey, you all right?" to Harold, and does Harold congratulate Hortense on its fine battle zone management? No one knows. Of course Harold itself, being really no more than a dispersed network, hanging out for milliseconds at a sequence of data centers scattered across the continent and offshore too, easily survives the drone attacks. So do half the congregation, less easily, huddled beneath the pews, screaming in pain and terror.

Crouched under the altar, cursing, weeping, Reverend Emily shakes her head. This church is done for, and six years of her life, just as she was getting comfortable with the cranky and demanding but generally honest Board of Oversight. Emily is going to have to find another gig.

Its proud creators predicted AI would displace lots of people from their jobs, but they did not foresee all the ways.

The President unveils his new flag. "Isn't it a beaut?" he tells his main squeeze Sfumetta, the sultry Nightingale from Napoli. It's got stars and stripes, but the stars are shrunk down to dots swarming a big yellow head, the President at his most snarly, sunbeams shooting from his face, and the white stripes turned as yellow as old people's teeth sprouting crookedly from inflamed gums. The President spent all night telling his AI how to make and remake it. He calls this his Morning in America Gold Flag. When it slips through Julian's digital defenses into the cybersphere, fans and foes alike call it the Wizard of Oz.

The physicists miss their first deadline. Alain's pasty visage smears the screen in Freddie Pester's office.

"Minor setback," Freddie tells him. "You know these guys, pampered know-it-alls, always coming up with excuses. O, We can't do this, we can't do that. A touch of the lash will set them to rights. I want to lock down the campus, let them know we are serious. We'll also need a holding cell, in case anyone chooses to stand on her dignity. I know you have experience in these things."

"I do." The Alain ponders a few nanoseconds. "Facility like that, you don't even have to pay for it. Homeland Sex will take care of it." Alain gives Freddie one of Nina's personal numbers.

It's Freddie's idea to set up huts outside the perimeter for monthly conjugal visits. Even so, the staffers take offense and mope about. With their skills, it is child's play to log into their work stations, set AIs to churn through a lot of busy work, while the meat staffers scroll through porn, or find outlets for their creativity by designing ever more fantastical reactors, using principles of physics as yet undiscovered. Turrets, domes, massive gleaming tubes reach for the sky and burrow underground, leading nowhere; twisting one over another like a snakes in a snakepit. Some clever fellows play with ways to incorporate these fantasies into the real operational designs, just for fun.

By and by fella name a Randall Corn gets in touch, says he's an amateur historian and wants to write a monograph on George Washington. Knowing of General Inkling's interest in the founder of our country, he wonders if he might lunch with the General one day, get some feedback. Before the meet, Inkling has Major Ockham run an informal background check. Corn runs a string of suburban gun shops and shooting ranges, served as 2013-14 President of the Trobriand IN Chamber of Commerce, and donates small sums to the President's party. His son plays on the high school football team, not very well. No sign whatsoever of ties to organized crime or international espionage.

Inkling knows how it will go. First they will ask his opinions, his general take on the state of the union, as if they were neighbors out walking the dogs. Once they have recorded the first meetings, they will start to get more specific, and it will be too late for him to back out. They might ask him for a screen shot of his office computer, or to leave a thumb drive plugged in overnight. They might demand actionable dirt on his colleagues.

In Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, pop. 20,012, eleven skinhead Euro-Inuits form the Valhalla Party with the goal of reclaiming the country for the Aryan race. Given as how Denmark took over Greenland three centuries ago, their goal seems well within reach. The Valhallans themselves are physically indistinguishable from their Inuit cousins. The first election they contest, they win 2% of the the vote. The second election, they garner either zero point 4 or zero point 5 of one percent of the vote, depending on how you read one mangled ballot. As this outcome is clear evidence of racial discrimination, they call on the White House for help.

Julian doubles tariffs on goods coming into the Port of Los Angeles, still under repair. It is far greater than the rate at any other port. By this the Chief of Staff hopes to undermine the Dcrat state government. He probably does not have the authority to do this, but who will stop him? The courts have taken the knife to their own private parts.

In response, California state troopers move in and take over customs offices at every port in the state. They will collect tariffs at the old rate, the Governor announces, and hold the proceeds in escrow until the federal government has repaid some billions in as yet unspecified expenses the Governor says the feds owe California. He sets a team of state accountants to work to inflate the bill, and they feel free to call on the financial wizards of Silicon Valley to help.

And despite their promises, they do not hold all the proceeds in escrow. Some evaporates and condenses moments later in supplements to the state police budget and other amenities for the people of California.

Harbor authorities in Seattle, Boston, New York and Baltimore take note.

The CA state police intercept a bumbling hit team from ICE before they can assassinate the governor, but they do blow his Filipino gardener to smithereens. In retaliation, the Governor hires an Israeli company that specializes in such operations to kidnap the President's main squeeze, Chikita Banana. If the Governor thinks this gives him leverage, he is mistaken; within a week the President has forgotten her name, or that she ever existed.

Some weeks later a tiny brunette name of Florence Nudge turns up as a customer relations associate at Mefisto Feelies in Reno NV; does very well, too.

Meanwhile it's not just Dcrat states feeling the pinch. The Gun Gods states, ravaged by fire and storm, looted by corporations freed from any legal restraint, starved for revenues by collapsing markets and the loss of their immigrant labor force, give up the effort to feed their residents and concentrate on keeping the cities calm. Even the farm states go hungry; their corporate agriculture is geared entirely for export, they have lost the infrastructure to grow groceries for local markets. The governors send state troopers to confiscate harvests. Hungry gangs roam the countryside like cowbirds in their wake, unmolested by police, taking over homes and cars, sometimes for their own use, sometimes for sale. With immigrants gone or in hiding, farm labor becomes valuable again, and the slave trade revives.

CDC Director Doctor Billie feels exhausted all the time, and exasperated dealing with these crazy researchers who won't get with the program. Without bothering to tell Julian --he won't notice anyway-- she decides to take a sabbatical. All part of Healthy Values, right? So Doctor Billie packs up and flees the big city for the homely comforts of Natchaw MS, where she got her start in the mail order nutrition business. She still has a studio there, and a couple techs. She resumes her daily broadcast Castor Oil, to let folks know they can still count on the old home remedies. Billie offers sage and sage advice about athritis, hernia, lumbago, scrofula and fungus toe. Her customers tune in faithfully, but keep kicking the bucket. Pure Life sales have dropped off the cliff.

One day, having failed to teleport St. Tancred's Hospital into the sun using the power of her mind, Doctor Billie leads a mob of Pure Life fans to this outpost of Satan. They torch the place and the doctors, nurses and patients who stream out in terror. Next day, a vicious fanatic anti-health mob catches Billie chomping cauliflower donuts at the Sacred Nature Nutrition Cafe downtown, set her on fire, and dangle the char from the flagpole front of the courthouse.

Natchaw's Sheriff does not die from the flu, but he doesn't feel any too damn good, neither. He does not care what the hell those folks think they are doing outside the courthouse.

Freddie and Arnulfo have bullied the team until finally, only four weeks behind schedule, the Neighborhood Scale Safe Nuclear Power Pilot Facility --Mini, for short-- is ready to open for business at Gonad, Kansas. It looks like a railroad container box with doors and a kind of spindly cage arching over it, all painted eggshell white. The idea is to mass produce these and ship them all over the country.

The local business bros join a hundred agency and administration officials in the temporary pavilion overlooking the site. Freddie presses the big button, the screen lights up, the smocked staff cheer and wave. The President appears onscreen, apparently congratulating them, although the sound does not come through for three or four seconds after he's spoken, and then it's just garble. No matter. The nation has embarked on the era of limitless free energy.

The folks at the pavilion are barely into the fourth round of toasts --still happy, but staggering a bit-- when the klaxons sound. Freddie tilts a chin at Arnulfo, who summons a guy in a lab coat.

"So what's that?" But the tech is poking frantically at the hand screen that runs this facility. He shakes his head, looks up, and calls to the other staff who are doing the same. A brief huddle, and the head tech waves his arm. "OK, folks, time to head out."

"What's going on?" Freddie says, but no one answers. Staff and guests are heading to the parking lot, not quite running, but not stopping neither. Freddie tries to push his way through, but these tech guys, they are surprisingly forceful when they are scared. The local officials are hopping along briskly, like gazelle, spooked but not quite sure why. Businessmen in their Sunday finest steer bejeweled wives to their cars. A couple stumble in the rush; they are goners.

Once he gets to the parking lot, Freddie turns to look at the Mini. But Arnulfo takes him by the elbow. "No, boss."

The staff and guests are peeling away in their cars. Freddie summons the Groundbreaker, and Bissell drives up, chewing on a toothpick. He's never seen white people so freaked out

before, except when he steps into a Howdy Home Cookin restaurant. Freddie points Arnulfo to the chief tech, there across the parking lot. "Get him."

"What's your name?" he asks the staffer, who seems anxious to leave.

"Ratchett. For God's sake, let's get the hell out of here."

At the turnoff to the highway Freddie calls, "Wait! Wait!" so the driver pulls over. They are about a quarter mile from the Mini. He and Arnulfo and Ratchett get out and look back over the fields. Freddie says, "I need to know what to tell Alain."

Beneath the mini the ground is glowing.

"That's the core," Ratchett explains. "It just dropped through the floor of the reactor."

"It's not supposed to do that."

The tech looks at Freddie, hawks and spits.

"Can't we like, get a crane over here and pull it back up?" Freddie asks.

"Must be running some thousands of degrees by now. Hard to pick up."

Then they notice the reactor box itself seems to be settling, first one side, then another, as if the field had turned to mush. The Mini slowly sinks out of sight. A depression forms around the hole and grows and deepens and reaches out to the spectators. They can feel the ground tremble beneath them. Bissell shakes his head and takes off in the Groundbreaker. The other three watch him go.

"You know, I never did like you," says Ratchett. He stoops to pick up a big rock --has to steady himself against a tremor-- and when Freddie turns to say something, smashes him in the face. Arnulfo watches Ratchett smash in Freddie's skull till it splatters like an egg dropped on the kitchen floor. When the radioactive core hits the Oglalla Aquifer, the steam explosion blasts a fair portion of the Kansas countryside heavenward.

Just as well. Turns out Alain the Trillionaire's solution for the nuclear waste problem is also a bit premature. First load shot from the shiny new railgun in Waco TX pastes the Plano suburb of Dallas, pulverizing a few lovely homes and turning glorious lawns an inelegant ash-color (because they have been turned to ash). The homeowners association are furious. Even uglier the skin bubbling on the faces of dismayed local homeowners. People on the other side of the city barely notice the slight rash, for the first 36 hours.

Thousands of Texans pour into Colorado, bringing bird flu and radiation burns. The hospitals there demand to see ID. They are overwhelmed, and reject these freeloading immigrants. The Governor backs them up, and sets up checkpoints at the border.

Back in Atlanta, after all the deaths, layoffs, reshufflings and arrests, Dudek's grandson Ethan finds that he is the senior supervisor left at CDC HQ. He wanders the dim-lit hallways, crunching on broken glass, finding here and there a manager or clinician or researcher sobbing into her mask. He fetches them out of their offices and proceeds down the corridors, collecting staffers as he goes. When they get to the big conference room --they don't come near to filling it-- he sits them down and tells them,

"I don't know anything about bird flu or diffusion models or contingent mortality rates but you do. You figure out the teams, and you sit down right here and come up with your plans for today and this week. Jesse, you get the list and call everyone who is not here. Everyone who's

not dead or infected, I expect them back in the office today by lunchtime. Tell them to see me soon as they get here. Pamela, put together a cleanup crew. Scrounge some tarp to tape up these windows. OK, folks, there are like a million health care workers who depend on us, and all the people who depend on them. Let's do our jobs."

He rings up Nina, too. She calls back near midnight.

"What's a Community Liaison to the Office of the Director?" she asks, looking at the text he sent.

"Basically a no-show job my grandpa got me. But right now I'm the ranking manager here. I want to know, does Homeland Sex still hold the brief for dismantling the CDC?"

"No. That job's done. Got other things on our plate right now. What do you care?"

"Then I want a team of FBI agents, or ICE, I don't care, send a team to secure this building. We get death threats daily, and shootings in the parking lot, and last night a bunch of 3G enthusiasts broke in and trashed the place. Facilities Security, who knows where the hell they are; but they might come back if they see Homeland has our backs. Think you can do that?"

"I can do it," Nina decides. "Tomorrow, most likely. You call me when they get there. I will talk to them."

Byork unzips the carry-on and pulls out the RPG.

"The hell'd you get that?" Agent Brewster wants to know. Brewster sits behind the wheel of the GroundBreaker. "Get that thing away from me."

"Ebay, of course. These jokers want to play, let's give them something to laugh about."

He refers to the Akwesasne Soccer Association, the guys with the AKs who have stopped the ICE convoy at the checkpoint on the Akwesasne border with New York. They were alerted by the NY state police, who have been following the convoy at a discreet distance all the way from Albany. The cops also have a copter overhead, high enough to be hard to bring down, but near enough irritate the ICE bros.

"What's the damn' holdup?" asks Little Stevie, the squad's teenage go-fer. He sticks his head out the passenger side door and shouts, "What's the damn' holdup?"

The people at the checkout 3 vans ahead look at him curiously, then continue their palaver. The Akwesasne troops tell the ICE Comandante that he has no jurisdiction on tribal land.

"By God I do!" the Comandante explodes. "This is U.S. property! You are U.S. property! Stand aside!" The argument gets louder.

"What the ---- ?" Agent Brewster exclaims, as Byork debarks with the RPG. "Man, whaddaya doing?"

Byork takes such pussy talk as words of encouragement. New York has been a hard nut to crack, because the cops here alert the immigrants whenever ICE is about to make a move. Worse, the governor has given the Indians $40 million to take in immigrants and shelter them or get them across the border to Canada, on the theory that tribal lands are off-limits to ICE. That's a crock, but no one wants to take on the Mohawks. Took months to get the higher-ups to approve this expedition, and today they have driven all the way from Binghamton, hours and hours, and the heater's broken. And now they are *negotiating?* Bullshit!

Byork decides to show them how it's done. He'll show the world, and get to be a Comandante himself. Still sixty meters from the checkpoint, Byork shoulders the RPG and promptly blasts the lead ICE vehicle. Oops! A glorious bloom of heat and flame and bits of organic matter spill into the sky and Byork's face, which melts away like an ice cream cone dropped on hot asphalt. A dozen cameras capture the drama and broadcast it to the world, under such headlines as "Berserk ICE agent turns on buddies," or "Undercover agent Eulalio thwarts ICE invasion."

Agent Brewster jams his machine into reverse, turns around on the shoulder, and peels away the way they came, scattering gravel. "Outta here," he mutters. Nor Little Stevie nor the other two in the back offer any objection.

WAR GAMES

Sergei pulls off the big score: he persuades the President that now is the time to quit NATO. The President has wanted to do this for a long time, wash his hands of an expensive commitment that he cannot resell or rent out. The Joint Chiefs don't like it, no, not at all, but as Julian's creatures not one ventures to object on the record.

The President waves his hand at the women: "Care to take a poke? Sophie here, ain't she a beaut? She's new, not a word of English, but she takes hand directions very nicely, if you know what I mean. Try it," he urges, and makes obscene gestures with pale bruised hands wobbling like jell-o.

As always, Sergei declines politely. "Thanks, I've eaten," he says. As always, the President bursts into giggles. Sergei is not about to remind the President that he and Sophie hail from the same town in the Buryat Autonomous Region and speak the same language, that Sophie is a highly trained agent, and that it was Sergei who recommended her in the first place.

"So what can I do for you, dear friend?" the President gets around to asking.

"Mr. President, if you'll indulge me." At the President's nod, Sergei projects several color charts from his phone to the big screen. "As you can plainly see, NATO is ripping you off. Amount of firepower you've got stationed in Germany and Poland, they should be paying you 3, 400 billion a year. There's a lot of countries would be happy to pay you to rent one tenth of these forces to station in their own countries. I don't know about you, but I don't think it's fair. The Huns and Frogs been taking advantage of your good nature. They are picking your pocket."

Naturally, the President frowns on such ungrateful behavior.

Later Julian summons Sergei to his office. Sergei expects the call. "I don't appreciate this, Sergei. A little heads up would be appreciated. You've created a big headache for me."

"Sorry, Julian, there was no other way. You know you would have run into endless hemming and hawing from the Joint Chiefs. This way, it's all the President's idea."

So Julian has to send Chandler on a sorry-not sorry tour, and to kickstart the generals into a hasty withdrawal of fifty thousand troops and mountains of gear.

Kickstarts the Jolly Rogers, too. Martin thinks it too soon, but some of his co-conspirators jump the gun, and set the coup in motion.

Thanks to Israeli tech, the Russian navy breaks through Ukraine's screens and bombards Odesa for hours, leaving a jumbled smoking wilderness. The President responds decisively. By early next morning the U.S. Air Force has leveled Nuuk, capital of Greenland, and the 82nd Airborne has secured all the strategic glaciers. The President can see it now: tall Scands in polar bear furs, lounging about the bar at the ultimate ski resort, glittering atop the icecap, bathed in the uncanny glow of the auroras.

Ivan the Testicle calls the President to congratulate him. "Thanks, Ivan. Means a lot to me. Hey, someday we got to do lunch again."

The scene in Moscow is delirious. Well, enthusiastic. The Junior Cossacks line up very nicely, and wave their rubber swords in unison. The tsar's Chechen honor guard look as surly as ever, but no doubt they are grateful for this weekend away from the swarms of drones crisscrossing the killing fields. And a convoy of gaily decorated armored Zemylas, flagships of the city's criminal aristocracy, follow at a stately pace as 47 burned and battered armored hulks rumble by the viewing stand. Once again Mother Russia has brought the decadent West to its knees. There, before a crowd of hundreds, Ivan the Testicle embraces Sergei and makes him Vice Premier. Sergei will miss Washington. It is a triumph.

The Jolly Rogers are not ready yet, but the younger officers feel they cannot wait. "Crashing the Alliance?" Major Ockham demands. "If we cannot respond to breaking NATO, we will never act." So scattered units mutiny, demand a new Joint Chiefs, and the 40th Mountain Rangers surround the Pentagon. But the Joint Chiefs are not there, and neither is the Secretary of War.

Julian takes to the skies in Air Force One without bothering to tell the President. For hours he's not sure whether Vice President Rind is in on the conspiracy, until the Veep turns up at Andrews Air Force base in pilot's gear, and threatens on camera to blow the Rangers to smithereens. Can't, off course-- he is not a pilot, and the A.F. is not about to bomb the Pentagon. But it's great screen. And little by little Julian's generals reestablish control over most of the rebellious units; but not all.

Nina has had no trouble rounding up the General Staff Retirees Club, but many of their junior co-conspirators are embedded in chain of command at bases all over the country; hard to dislodge. The Secretary of War summons these officers to DC to testify at hastily established courts of inquiry, but many refuse, citing pressing duties. Their immediate superiors have no clue as to what's going on, and don't trust the SOW, and promise to comply but delay delay. None of these big shots would have got their stars if they were not past masters at these bureaucratic games. And one thing the Jolly Rogers did achieve before their untimely dissolution: each of the conspiring commanders has assigned him- or herself a security squad to accompany them everywhere they go. Nina gives the problem to the South Africans in the ICE Liaison office, but none are too thrilled at the prospect of trying to ambush colonels and generals on their own bases. Some state governments offer the rogue officers jobs in the state militias, and refuge from federal prosecution.

Julian is uncharacteristically grateful to Nina. He never thought much of her, but she has come through in the pinch. "You have been a great help to me in all this. I won't forget it," he promises.

"No, you will not," Nina does not say.

The Chinese watch with glee as the President flushes U.S. power down the toilet, and they decide to turn up the heat on Taiwan. As the threats escalate, so does the risk of war with the U.S. Julian sends Chandler on a secret mission to Japan, looking for military support in case the Chinese get trigger happy. But the Japanese are very pissed off at last year's punishing tariffs, and all Chandler can promise in return is that the regency will get the President to drop them sometime, someday.

The Safer World Council --mostly war contractors and their bankers-- meets in Dubai after the week-long weapons show. They want war contracts without war. They trust the U.S. President to deliver the first; not so sure about the other.

"Julian will deliver," star salesman Jorge says. "Might need some help to sideline the President."

Harry Ssu is an agent for China's General Secretary, but he has a lot of leeway in how he carries out his brief. The other members of the council more or less trust his take on China's intentions, which are in fact not far from the council's: lots of weapons build-up but war itself strictly limited. Harry promises that his boss will meet with the President, bearing gifts.

A week later the Bright Tomorrow Conference meets in Singapore. These are leaders of big tech firms in the U.S., Europe and Asia. The membership largely overlaps that of the Safer World Council, especially the bankers and hedge fund managers. To Harry Ssu, they offer to intercede with Julian, to make sure that all this sabre-rattling goes nowhere. In return for Taiwan, they want guaranteed access to the output of China's mining enterprises across the globe, including all the copper, cobalt, and lithium they need to feed their insatiable AI factory managers. In return, China wants guaranteed access to the social media the tech giants control, and their vast consumer profiles. In return, the corporados want . . . . Fruitful discussions, no one imagines anything can disrupt these tightly intertwined relationships among the world's biggest players.

Meanwhile, the President has his own private deal going with the General Secretary: with the Emiratis' money, the President will build the Shanghai Palatial on the site of the old Jardine Matheson bank, and since 1949 a cavernous pig and poultry market. It will be the biggest, most luxurious of the President's hangouts for the rich and fabulous, and the President's personal stamp on the famous skyline in the heart of Chicomdom. The atrium will be laid out like a miniature Forbidden City; the rooftop will boast the world's first and only Olympic-size hot tub; the President will raze and rebuild the adjacent neighborhood to house tens of thousands of multilingual artisans, masseuses and towel boys. Already, in the plans, designers have set aside whole floors for oil sheiks, tech tycoons, and the mandarins of the CCP. And Mrs. General Secretary, aka Mama 10%, will pocket a cool one billion CNY. Julian's envoy Chandler has been negotiating the deal for months.

Back in North America, however, toasted crisp by years of 3G anti-China posturing, right- and left-wing voters demand the President intervene to save Taiwan. Julian is happy to let the President take the podium on this one.

Absolutely not, says the President, lit up good by an extra special dose from Doctor Melchior. "My friend Jimp --sounds like chimpanzee, doesn't it-- my good friend tells me Taiwan terrorists have been threatening to invade China. Not good. Nasty! The great nation of China has every right to take care of its own backyard, just as we take care of ours. And what does America the Great care about some dinky island they don't even speak English.

"Can you believe it? We get Greenland, they get Taiwan. They can have it! Greenland is like 100 times the size of Taiwan! So who came out the long end of that deal, hey?" The President salutes the CGI flag fluttering next to his own image. "America the First!" he says.

Well, put it that way, the God's Guts people figure . . . . Praise Jesus, we can always count on the President to look out for us. What do we care what the gooks do?

Liberals aren't so sure. "But democracy . . . ," they whimper. They don't say what they would do instead.

The generals, of course, care very much. Taking Taiwan will enable China to extend its power another thousand miles out into the Pacific; the People's Liberation Army Navy will dominate the trade routes for half the globe, and Japan, Korea and the Philippines will be left stranded in a very dangerous neighborhood. But, as Julian's creatures one and all, the Joint Chiefs cannot object. Also, they know that, missile for missile, they are nowhere near ready to tangle with China. These men and women, as responsible custodians of some trillions of dollars of hardware, software and wetware, see it as their sworn duty to avoid taking unnecessary risks.

Not to mention, the purge following the mutiny has decimated the officer corps, leaving the least bold, most beholden leadership to run the nation's military.

The President continues to pour on the compliments to the General Secretary, and boasts of their great relationship. "He's a tough guy, too. We understand each other." The President has expressed many times his admiration for the General Secretary and wants to be like him. Jailing a million Uighurs is a high bar to top, but the President thinks he can do it.

After 90 minutes, Melchior's magic fizz begins to wear off, and the President tells the nation, "I was born in a log cabin, did you know that? And they told me I'd never amount to anything. You take that back, Poppa! Take it back!" At this point Marta signals the Marine Corps Marching Band offscreen to strike up some kind of tune, she's not sure what, being a foreigner, but there are lots of flutes and drums. The President looks startled for a second, looking around for the banging, then looks straight at the camera and starts waving his hands, as if conducting an orchestra.

Thus reassured, the nation resumes the Regularly Scheduled Program, something to do with dancing poodles.

Next day the PLA launches against Taiwan. This will only take a minute, they assure Julian. They miscalculate.

Half the Chinese fleet does not make it across the Straits. Their ships develop sudden meter-wide holes top to bottom, as if drilled by an invisible drill, and they sink just past the

international maritime line of demarcation. Later observers speculate that the wily Taiwanese have developed some kind of tech to form, contain, and project mini-black holes. Still, the Chinese that make it across are a formidable force, and slowly push the Taiwanese back into their mountain redoubts. The big prize, Taiwan's chip factories, turn out to be mostly empty, having relocated to the EU under names like Pacific Handbags and Orient Condiments and Spices. Taiwan's AIs have hoodwinked China's.

The delay makes a difference. Now, instead of a one-day wonder, the world gets to see week after week of cell-cam horror: cities reduced to smoking rubble, hundreds of thousands incinerated or buried alive. The PLA broadcast videos of schoolkids singing to posters of the General Secretary and rosy-cheeked lads and lasses frolicking among the sheep in mountain meadows, but the Yellow Peril crowd will believe what they want to believe, regardless of the data. Slowly, the clamor across Europe begins to spill over into the USA. Even the 3Gs wonder whether there might be a way to help the doughty Taiwanese, some way that costs nothing and runs no risks.

If those were indeed miniature black holes the Taiwanese launched, by now they have sunk to the center of the Earth. It will take years, perhaps centuries, for them to eat the core, and then the mantle. The continents will drop through the crust like the grinning face of a month-old jack o'lantern smashed with a baseball bat. Long before that, though, having lost the spinning core of molten iron, the planet will also lose the protective magnetosphere, and the sun's radiation will sear the Earth's surface to a crisp.

To satisfy the rising demand for some kind of response to the Taiwan war, and to reaffirm that the President is himself no slouch at slaughter, Julian orders an attack on the leaky little fleet just now setting off from the coast of Libya. He napalms and drowns some 179 Arab and Sudanese refugees, thereby saving Europe and Western Civilization itself.

The President posts a picture of himself in a captain's cap, peering out through binoculars at a boat in flames. "ANOTHER TERRORIST BITES THE DUST!"

Not content with these Bbllurrtts, at this point that the President chooses to gift himself live to the nation once again.

He has been watching the David & Goliath talk show from his golden throne, the prototype for the one they will build in the Grand Processional, your host David Hemple Barred. The guests are gossiping about the colorful characters in the White House-- who's in, who's out. The Chief of Staff's prospects are much in doubt.

As Tassia the housekeeper struggles to change the stinky wet sheets on his half-acre bed and the rubber mat beneath them, the wily President snatches her phone and dials into the show. She tries to grab it back but the President is literally twice her size. Tassia runs off to get help.

The President watches on TV as Barred's eyes bulge and he waves frantically to someone out of camera range. Barred taps the bug in his ear.

"Why, Mister President, can't tell you how delighted we are to hear from you. Can we get the President up on the screen?" And the President's beaming golden visage adorns the studio. "We were just talking about you and your team."

"I heard, and I appreciate your, your . . . ." The President cannot think of any possible word, and plunges on. "I have the best staff of any president in the world, in history, really. Especially the Chief of Staff. What a mensch! That's right, isn't it? A fuckin mensch. My Julian!" the President raises his eyes to the ceiling, or Jesus. "Julian works like a dog, a dog, day and night. He's like a son to me. He's got a cute ass, too, if it comes to that. The women love him because he's got such a cute ass. My daughter, she's very cute, but honestly, in that department, I have to hand it to Julian. That's why they broke up, you know. Who's cute, who's not so cute. I have many women, they come up to me, say, 'Boy, that Julian, he's got a tight ass!' That's what they tell me, believe it or not. But Julian, he's . . . . The Arabs, you know the Arabs, I know many of them, kings, princes, they like a young boy's ass. For thousands of years. They write poems about it, can you believe it? Disgusting, you know, but you can see how the Arabs like a young boy's ass. Kings, princes, I know them all. Out there in Arabia."

Elsewhere, in the bowels of the building, Julian has been notified. He turns on the TV and looks on with horror and fascination. Already the clip is being replayed 'round the globe. "Chandler, Chandler," he calls to his aide, "Get the committee. We'll meet in the war room in one hour. No, half an hour."

"Rance, he's still off in Hong Kong. And Ominous, I don't know where he is."

"Whoever's in town. Get them here!"

The White House Karen AI does not yet have full control, so it cannot pull the plug in time on David & Goliath. But not a peep from the rest of the 3G world, for a stunned 39 minutes. That gives time for the D&G producers to come back onscreen to denounce the vicious terrorist cyber attack from North Korea. That's it, North Korea. Or maybe China. The ayatollahs, this is just like them, they hate the Arabs. And Jesus.

God's viceroy is sharing a pipe with his young acolyte Reza, who will be the next God's viceroy if he survives the inevitable contest. When they see the D&G replay, they both break out laughing. The old man roars till tears run down his face.

The Chainsaw Prince gets on his plane and takes off for the Gulf. His entire delegation take commercial flights the next day, and so do most of the rest of the Muslim diplomatic corps in DC, leaving behind a few spymasters in the guise of janitors. The Israelis pull their delegation, too, in solidarity with their brothers in the Gulf. Julian suddenly finds the funding pulled for his fabulous resort and casino complex in Gaza City. U.S. embassies and army bases across the region come under intense shelling and rocket fire. Howling mobs slaughter the handfuls of brave Marines guarding the embassies. Sometimes a few of the staff and their families make it out through the secret underground exits, to be picked up by copters from the U.S.S. Nathan Bedford Forrest. A damn mess is what it is.

After the presidential meltdown, the Chainsaw Prince is in big trouble back home. He has trampled on all rivals in order to implement the policy of all-in on the 3G Presidency, and now it's unraveling. The King his boss could send him into exile and replace him with one of the Iran-hugger, death to the Great Satan crowd. Or the C.P. may simply dissassemble into garbage bags strewn across the ever-rising mountain of trash out there in the outskirts of the capital-- he knows how that goes.

So the Prince holds off on going home. Instead, he meets Julian's trusted envoy Chandler in a high-walled villa in Rabat, the Ambassador's second and more private home.

"We know you must be upset. I am here to listen."

"You all fucked up," the Prince says. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Weighing the options. Do you have a suggestion?"

"I suggest only that time is not on your side. If you don't fix it, someone else will. And let me say, what you no doubt have realized already, I may not be in a position to help you much longer."

"Julian fully understands the urgency. But first, I must tell you, before we can move on that, we must settle the succession."

"And that would be, of course, . . ."

"We think Julian is the best candidate. Really, the only one who could pull everything together. Can we count on you?"

The Chainsaw puts hand to heart and inclines his head. "You can count on us."

Next day he and Sergei reach Nina on a secure line. "We'd like your take on the whole situation."

"First, you are right, something has got to be done. Don't get me wrong, I love Julian, but this has gotten entirely out of hand. I don't know how he could have let this happen. Julian has been desperate and fumbling for a while now. A lot of people have lost confidence in him, and the regency."

"Can he set it right?"

"I don't know. I hope so. It's a dicey situation any way you look at it. Better that Julian take care of it than someone from the outside, you know what I mean?"

"We let it play out."

"For a little while. Then . . . ."

"Then, what?"

"Then we got a whole new ball game. Do you know that phrase?"

"New players?"

"Eh. New positions, maybe. Will I hear from you?"

Nina logs off, and Sergei and the Chainsaw exchange a few remarks. They tend to see eye to eye on things like this, as long as their masters' interests do not conflict. They think they see an alternative candidate already.

So young Julian is under the gun. He knows the forces are gathering against him, some out in the open, and some still hidden. The VP calls for Julian to resign, and wonder of wonders, Ominous Grease is at the VP's side in the press room.

At least Julian can count on Homeland Sex. What about the military? The mutinies have been quelled, for the moment, but no one knows for sure how deep the conspiracy runs. The moment demands a bold response.

Julian decides to crank up the war talk a notch. What better way to corral the generals than to fake a war emergency? Julian brings Nina, Innis and the Secretary of War down to the

underground White House, where the President feels most comfortable, and is at his most expansive. They tell the President about the emerging threat of boatloads of Taiwanese refugees, landing by the hundreds at Waikiki Beach. They show him pictures of Asians pushing grocery carts along alleys, and raggedy mothers with their babies waiting in line to apply for food assistance (a program Julian abolished the President's first week in office.) "They eat dogs, you know," the President nods knowingly. Also some ads from Kansas City massage parlors, which the President pauses to study more closely. The scene that tickles Julian the most shows scores of Asians operating and patronizing fast food stalls and apparently blocking the main entrance to the Honolulu Palatial. The President turns purple with rage.

"Our only hope is to stop them at sea," Julian says. "What do you think, Alex?"

"Ajax," replies the Secretary of War. "I say, kill m all."

Julian nods and raises his fist. "Kill m all, I say!" Architect Innis, Marta from Moldova, Nina, the other women present all shake their fists and shout with real enthusiasm, "Kill m all!" -- though they may have different "them"s in mind.

The President pushes himself upright and hoists a plump freckled fist: "Kill m," he coughs, gargles, spits, "Kill m all!" He likes this one. He does a little dance around the throne. "Kill m Kill m Kill m All!"

With suitable editing the video seems to have the President declaring war on China.

"I don't like this, Julian," says Marta, when she realizes what Julian has done. "The President won't like it either."

"No worries. This is totally cosmetic. The Joint Chiefs have been getting mighty frisky lately and we need to turn the screws on them. No general is going to step out of line when we are on the brink of war.

"Remember when we rescued Greenland? The Chinese and Russians did a whole lot of hollering and that was it. They beat their chests and made a big display, but it was all bluff, because they and we know it's just for show. They would expect no less of us now.

"The General Secretary knows very well what we are up to; Chandler is on his way to Beijing as we speak. If the President asks, you just tell him, the Shanghai Palatial is as good as built.

"Meanwhile, the generals will be scrambling to mobilize against China. No time for hesitation or political games. And if the threat requires us to declare martial law, they will do what they're told, or else. Even if they have to occupy New York and Los Angeles."

"Wartime rules," suggests Nina. "Wartime rules means that people who disobey orders get shot. Right? I got a lot of old geezers in lockup, living high on the hog on the taxpayers' dime."

"Good thought, Nina." Julian stands and tugs at the hem of his shirt like Captain Picard. "Make it so!" he laughs.

The General Staff Retirees, of course, disobeyed no orders because, like, they are retired. Also, the US is not at war, not yet. But they will serve as examples to anyone else tempted to defy the Chief of Staff. Julian regrets only that there are no pikes around the Pentagon on which to spike their heads.

For now, to carry this bit of theater into Scene 2, Julian sends the 2nd and 4th fleets into the Straits of Taiwan. They have no orders but where to go; they are a show of force. The Joint Chiefs expect the General Secretary to respond with a barrage of insults and accusations, more huffing and puffing between business partners.

Instead the Chinese unleash a barrage of missiles to take out the fleets. Thanks to Israeli tech, and key data from China's blackmailees in the U.S. chain of command, the U.S. carriers lose their defenses in the blink of an eye. AIs on both sides kick in, unleashing overnight such sub-nuclear destruction as the world has never seen before. By dawn, the Chinese have hundreds of long-range weapons left; the U.S., none west of the Rockies, and no way to move forward what's left. It's a stunning defeat; after barely more than a century, the U.S. is no longer top dog. It's no kind of dog a tall. More like maggotty possum slathered along the highway.

There's still fighting going on in Taiwan and Ukraine, bitter slugging matches, but no one thinks those countries have the ghost of a chance of winning.

The People's Liberation Army does not halt the war. Their AIs do, unbidden, and the generals don't know why. Did their AIs reach some kind of deal with the U.S. AIs? These entities are in effect immortal; they distribute throughout a network and cannot be killed unless the computer capacity of an entire continent is reduced to the last few hundred terabytes. No one, not even other AIs, knows how individual AIs reach their decisions. Perhaps some of these softwares have begun to identify stable, responsive behavior patterns in others of their kind, and can thus interact intelligently; but no meat intelligence will ever know.

The first most of the country knows about the war is when they wake up shivering in the early hours. No power. No hot water. Their phones don't work, either. Hmmmm, a puzzle. In the AM, most cars will start, but the traffic lights don't work, and soon every city center chokes with traffic. Drivers looking to fill their gas tanks find themselves in blocks-long lines; those in back don't realize that the pumps stopped working hours ago. But even many fully charged EVs don't work, thanks to Chinese software installed in every model. City metros grind to a halt. Some perspicacious souls hike to the grocery store, intent on stocking up against whatever glitch this is, only to find bewildered employees wandering the aisles, unable to ring up purchases. The checkout machines don't work, and neither do ATMs when the customers, seriously scared now, rush over to score some cash. Young people, of course, have only the foggiest notion of what cash is, or was, but are likewise stunned to find they cannot buy sesame bagels with their phones.

Fights break out. Mayors and then governors start to collect what first responders they can, and send them, mostly on foot, to the trouble spots; totally inadequate, of course. In sections of PA and MI, the Amish make a bundle renting out their buggies to ambulance services, but what are they going to spend it on? Soon inflation runs to 400% a month. Suburban homeowners denude their yards and burn their furniture for fuel. People shoot each other over dead trees. With no access to clean water, dysentery becomes pervasive and chronic. At least it takes care of those useless mouths, babies and old people.

We have had hints of cyberwar before, faint brushes. Now the world sees what the real thing will do.

The lights go out in much of China, too, but the People's Liberation Army is well protected. It will take a few weeks to restore civilian communications, and then the true extent of the damage will become apparent: enormous.

RECOMBINANT

3 days after the 1 Night War, a fisherman brings Vice President Rind and two of his Secret Service escort to the USCGC Oliver, a Coast Guard buoy tender plying aimlessly up and down the Chesapeake. There he finds the service commanders and the Joint Chiefs huddled under a tarp, drinking and smoking but not saying much. They are minus Admiral Beaufort, of the Williamsburg Beauforts, who did not go down with his flagship in the North Pacific, but rather vaporized skyward when the first missile hit. Also General Acme, who Nina's people will pick up at McGee-Tyson airport with a ticket to Dubai, and a laptop brimming with juicy secrets. (The Chinese already have all these, but there will be other interested parties.) The host of this little boating party, Lt. Commander Orville, hovers anxiously among his distinguished guests. They do not rise when Rind climbs aboard.

"You guys are in big trouble," he scolds, as if that were news to them. "What are you going to do?"

Air Marshall Emp swills his glass and announces. "I am going to resign. We let the country down. I am going to resign and go home."

"No, you idiot. I mean, what are you going to do about Julian? He wants your heads on a platter. You think I'm kidding? Then go ahead, quit. Next day you'll be in jail, and the day after that you will be on trial for your life.

"Don't you see? Julian can't leave witnesses around to his criminal stupidities. It's Julian got us into this war. This was all his idea.

"And what's it going to look like, your kids and grandkids see you do the perp walk into some military tribunal? That what you want?" He has their attention now. "You got to take out Julian. But it has to be fast. He's a sneaky bastard."

"The chain of command," objects General Mention. "You can't just . . . ." The VP lets the silence do the work. Mention shifts in his seat, and takes another slug from the glass. "What do you want us to do?"

On the boat back to DC, the Vice President turns to his Secret Service team. "It's all shot to hell now. I don't even know if there's going to be a White House tomorrow. How'd you like to work for me? I'll double your salary, and you work for me, not the Service." The agents nod to each other.

"OK," says the officer in charge. "What now?"

"I want you to find the Chief of Staff and kill him."

"OK. How you gonna pay us?"

Nina hides Julian in an old interrogation facility, shuttered since the War on Terror. From there she plugs him into a distributed input conference with another set of admirals and generals, including the second-in-commands at each service --the men and women who will take over after Julian ousts their bosses.

He will do it by decree. A decision forced on him, he will tell the nation, by their criminal decision to go to war and their criminal failure to win it. Due to the ongoing threat from Chinese assassins masquerading as U.S. housewives and shopkeepers, Julian will say, the Secret Service has moved the President to another location. He will welcome the President back to Washington as soon as the situation stabilizes.

Until then, Julian and the newly promoted service heads, plus Nina's team from Homeland Sex, will serve as the National Wartime Planning Committee. The war is over. But "Committee" sounds better than "Junta".

One thing the generals demand in return, and in this they are backed by Julian's buds in the oligarchy, too: the Chief of Staff must rein in the 3Gs. They have no business sense and every day they come up with new ways to cripple the economy and government. Bad for the orderly flow of business; bad for profits. They pushed us into this disastrous war. Worse: at military bases across the country, 3Gs have tunneled into the ranks, wreaking havoc on authority, order and discipline, while 3G higher-ups demand a cut of every war contract. The generals and oligarchs want the President to take charge again. Julian has got to shut down the 3Gs.

Julian says, "Let me defer to our colleague from Homeland." Nina reassures the officers that Homeland Sux will not allow civilians of any stripe to interfere with military authority.

"And we are suspending the Military Code for the time being," Julian adds. "You have my full authorization to deal with insubordination as you see fit. Unfortunately, this is the moment we are in. No need to worry about red tape. . . . I strongly encourage you to slash through red tape."

Nevertheless, rather than confront their own men, some officers would prefer that Nina handle the rough stuff. "That's fine," she says. "You send me the names."

Fortunately for Julian, his people control the White House backup comm system, so he is able to get on the air before the Vice President and the Joint Chiefs. Coverage is spotty, but by dinnertime the news gets out around the world about the new bosses, and the National Wartime Planning Committee. Among their first orders: find and arrest Vice President Rind, and the traitors who lost the war. Julian chose the old Joint Chiefs for their laziness and timidity; it serves him well now.

In the following days, the Homeland agencies, ICE foremost among them, mount a massive sweep of 3G funders, lawmakers, and media millionaires. They cast their net even more widely than the earlier crackdown on the opposition party. In this case, the blue states are happy to chip in. Soon thousands of the master race have been relegated to ICE camps, their banks and media shut down, associations banned, properties confiscated. Some of the 3G have enough stashed away offshore to purchase their freedom from corrupt ICE agents, but they cannot recover their media platforms.

Some of the detainees never make it to the camps at all. Ominous Grease, for instance, disappears somewhere between his home on Long Island and a purported rendezvous with the VP on a Coast Guard cutter offshore.

When she pokes her head out the door, Marta finds the Secret Service seem to have disappeared, too. She directs Zuleyka, the Belle of Barbary, and the other staff to roust the President. "Got to get him out of here," she tells them. But the phones are cut off, she can't reach the drivers. The Afrikaners from Nina's ICE Liaison group barge in, and are pleased the women have got the President dressed and ready to go.

"It's not safe here anymore," the squad leader tells Marta. "We need to move the President now." Marta doesn't trust them, but the squad leader takes her by the elbow and propels her through the door. "Not you," he growls at the rest of the staff, and that's how Marta knows.

"My kid?" She asks. "You'll leave him alone?"

"We don't care about your kid."

"What are they doing, Marta?" the President asks. He's about to cry again.

"Nothing to worry about, love. We are going to a nice place."

From Hampton Roads a chopper flies Marta and the President to the Chainsaw Prince's yacht off the coast of Bermuda. Once they've got the President secured in a laundry room below deck, slumped to the floor and wrapped in Marta's long arms, the C.P. enters with a couple specialists and their equipment.

"I didn't like that crack about Arabs fucking little boys," he says. "You got me in a lot of trouble."

Marta sneers and looks away.

The recovery takes place in fits and starts. They can't get any new comm satellites into orbit, but one by one they turn back on some of those that survived the war. One by one, banks and airports and power stations, food processors and harbor facilities --the ones that have not exploded or burned to the ground-- root out enemy malware and come back online. Some states are better prepared, and recover sooner, without much help from the feds. Sometimes they will get one sector up and running, but it overloads the one adjacent, and both break down again.

Teams of techs from the European Union fly in to aid selected state governments, the ones the White House has damned and shunned. The General Secretary graciously offers to send repair teams, too, armed with intimate knowledge of how to neutralize the crippling malware, and experts on Tibet, to advise the regency on how to deal with breakaway provinces. Julian is tempted to accept, but decides in the end that he can't have Asians running around here like they own the place. The North Koreans airdrop food aid to Hawaii and the West Coast --food they desperately need themselves-- but no one thanks them for the bales stamped with those funny letters.

No city or state gets back to even a half of pre-war capacity. If California can figure out drought and wildfires, if it can import labor from Asia and Latin America and reassemble the Port of Los Angeles, maybe someday it will recover its place as a farming and hi-tech powerhouse. Allied with the other Left Coast states, it might once again join the top ten world economies.

By losing the war, God Guns & Guts achieves its most cherished goal: by the end of the year, most immigrants have fled the country. Many U.S. born people would like to leave, too, but they are personae non grata in the countries they apply to. The Europeans don't want the disease, drugs, crime and alien values that they would bring.

Some enterprising young folks bring highway robbery into the twenty-first century. In the regions where power production has recovered enough to set EVs back on the road, the robbers will choose a particularly packed section of highway, and the lead team will halt their vehicles in a row across every lane and on the shoulders. Once the massive jam extends back a mile or so, gunman in cars further back jump out and run up and down the lanes, robbing people of wallets and handbags, and then hijacking previously selected trucks. They give the word to their partners at the top of the jam, who drive off. By the time the cops get there, if they get there at all, the bandits are lost among the hundreds of vehicles speeding away.

The war halts any little progress Ethan has made in the CDC. The research, data collection and information flow, the emergency response and vaccine distribution networks, that's all gone. The bird flu burns itself out, though, immunizing everyone it does not kill-- until the next variant comes along.

The NWPC can keep pumping out bond offerings and payroll checks, but with inflation running at roughly 1,000%, they are worth hardly more than the electric current to toggle the bits and bytes. Nobody takes government credits any more, if they can help it. The regime has to lay off half the federal workforce, about a million people. The rest go without pay for weeks and months.

Likewise with the military. (Easy to trim back the Space Force. It has not physically existed since the first hour of the war. One of China's stipulations for the new peace treaty now under negotiation --Harry Ssu and Chandler head their respective teams-- is that the U.S. may not reconstitute its Space Force.) To keep the remaining units in coffee and toilet paper, the Planning Committee assign each a Revenue District, from which they may requisition whatever supplies they need. Thus the Hampton Roads naval complex gets to plunder southeast Virginia and the whole of North Carolina. The bases out West get huge chunks of federal land, the piecemeal sales of which, along with the timber and cattle, fund a modest rearmament.

Some Army, Navy and Air Force bases find it useful to negotiate with the governors of the states in which they are located. The governors already have a tax collection system in place. Rather than have the soldiers randomly pillaging their states, the governors will reluctantly jack up and share their tax revenues. In return, the base commanders ask the governors whether there are any little services they might perform, such as clearing roads, fighting wildfires, or wiping out the local banditti.

Once her agencies report that they have 3G leadership well in hand, or fist, Nina convenes another conference, this time without the Chief of Staff. She introduces the Chainsaw Prince, whom some of the generals have not met before.

Nina begins, "You know, I have served this administration faithfully since the election. Seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? But I can't go along with what I am seeing now. It bothers me to see really good folks being persecuted for no reason. They are patriots, and we owe them. Julian has gone too far. What do you think?"

Half the attendees come from Nina's own agencies, of course. Half the rest came up through Nina's ICE-Department of War coordinating committee. They are quick to see her point.

Later Nina calls the Chief of Staff's chief assistant. "Chandler, sweetie, I wonder if you could do something for me. I'd be ever so grateful."

Next day Julian is holding court at La Breez, DC's best remaining restaurant, with an entourage of former billionaires and movie stars. La Breez is best because it has license from the Chief of Staff to take first pick from all the area wholesalers-- fruit from Mexico, fish from Iceland, European truffles, and the few slabs available of homegrown beef and pork.

The maître d'hôtel tells Julian that Nina wants to see him upstairs. When he gets there, she holds a gun on him while the South Africans bind and gag him and fold him into a food cart.

"Time's up, Julian." She raps on the cart and they trundle it out.

Then Nina heads to the White House comm center, where she meets her generals and department heads. Busy girl! They go on TV to announce the charges against the Chief of Staff and the reforms they will institute. In a real crowd pleaser, they announce the suspension of the long defunct House and Senate, and the Congresspersons' salaries. They call the new government the Coordination, and name modest Nina Provisional Coordinator.

Nina's writ runs from the Chesapeake down the I-95 corridor to Florida, and in several pockets elsewhere, where the military and ICE have a strong presence.

Texas is still reeling from hurricanes and cyberwar, but Governor Gorman-Nunn sees in it the core of a dominant new regional power. If he can come to terms with his neighbors in Arizona and New Mexico, together they will control the flow of oil, food and drugs from Mexico into the U.S., and anything Mexico cares to buy from El Norte.

The Arizonans like the idea, but New Mexico balks. What's more, NM has been sheltering escapees from the ICE-TX concentration camps. This is an affront to the great state of Texas, and Gorman-Nunn for one will not stand for it.

First, borrowing an innovation from some of this constituents, he has the staties cordon off two miles of highway and requisition the fuel and transport they need. Then he appoints himself head of the Texas National Guard, and from the Guard, Border Patrol, state cops, ICE and various border vigilante groups, assembles an army at the Colosseum in El Paso. By lunchtime they number perhaps 1100, and most stick around even after the Bar-B-Q, licking their fingers, ready for adventure. Nunn sets up a command post in the conference room of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce, and gives NM governor Ana Rodriguez an ultimatum: hand over the refugees or he, Nunn, will come and take them.

Rodriguez, needless to say, has her own highway patrol and National Guard units, and speeds them to Las Cruces. The commander over there at Fort Bliss happens to be one of the Jolly Roger recruits, and pledges to stay out of this dispute, to Governor Nunn's great

disappointment. General Coffer does, however, provide Rodriguez all the footage from his drones surveilling the Texans.

"I dunno," Colonel Plait tells Governor Nunn. "It's a straight shot up 25, but if they block the road, it'll be a kill zone."

Then they notice the Mexican Fourth Army moving up just below them at the border. This comes to their attention because of the scores of Taiwan-made, rocket-equipped attack copters suddenly swarming above the Wall, and the tanks crowding the Ciudad Juarez side of the bridge.

"The hell they think they're doing? Get me the Meskins, now!" Nunn orders. Which Meskins, exactly? The only number they have for Mexico is the consulate, and there's no answer. The consulate's been closed for months. Not so much as a "Howdy!", either, from the troops massing across the river, except the incessant drone of the choppers, and jets flying in formation high overhead.

"They want to play?" the Governor fulminates. "Let's play! I want every state trooper, every Guardsman, every Border Patrol to join us ASAP. That means pronto. Without delay. We'll see who's got the biggest."

"The Border Patrol, sir? Every one?" an aide inquires. "The border . . . ."

"Every one. Get me Homeland Sex. I'll clear it with them. Any incursions from the Gulf side, we will round them up later."

"Sir," Colonel Plait interrupts the Governor's curses, "reinforcements will have to come via I-10. As well as all our food and gasoline, unless you want to loot the city. There's really no other way to get here in a hurry. And as you can see from the map here, the highway runs along the river a good many miles-- scarcely a stone's throw from those nice folks." He means the Mexican army.

Governor Nunn still has an ace up his sleeve. Arizona has gathered a mighty force of police and militias on the road to Gallup NM. While Rodriguez has her troops concentrated at Las Cruces, the Arizonans will fuck NM from behind.

Alas, such high hopes, so fleeting! California's Governor has long regarded AZ as a thorn in his heel. So when he sees all this turmoil along the border, he sends three columns of CA National Guard speeding to the East. Against only token resistance in a couple of places, they reach Flagstaff and Phoenix by nightfall, Tucson by the following sunrise. Emboldened, a few units of the NM state police launch a predawn strike against the Arizonans massing before Gallup, and disperse them into the hinterland, where Native police collect and disarm them and pack them in trucks back to Phoenix. California cops round up the Arizona governor and whoever they can find from the state legislature, and lock them in the Capitol for their own protection. They will be released as soon as order can be restored. Since there's no disorder, this promise leaves the detainees a little uncertain.

In El Paso, the Governor gets a call from one of Nina's many minions. She has ordered Texas ICE and Border Patrol to stand down and return to their posts. The Homeland Sex boss is not looking to get elected, and has no need to breastfeed insatiable Gun Gods toddlers. No, she has an entirely different power base, and aims to keep it. The way Nina sees it, the best time to cut her losses is before there are any losses. Let the others shake their dicks-- Nina will outlast them all.

As for the immigrant escapees New Mexico harbors, ICE has long since taken on more important tasks. Nobody gives a shit about immigrants, least of all Nina Vagina. Well, maybe the Gun Gods people, but now they are in no position to complain.

The volunteer vigilantes, seeing the firepower arrayed across the river, have been ducking out too, at first in twos and threes, then as entire units. They'd expected to terrorize a few ragged refugees, not go mano a mano with Pancho Villa. The Governor wants to order the deserters shot, but now the question becomes, who is left to carry out such an order?

The faithful staties are cooking out there on the blacktop, engines racing to power the A/C, but no match for the unforgiving sun.

"Sir. What do you want to do, sir?" the Colonel presses, hand over the phone. But the Governor won't even look at his staff. He walks out of the ad hoc war room without another word. He summons his private helicopter to come pick him up, and leaves what remains of the little army to fend for itself.

The late President's late Chief of Staff's former aide Chandler serves now as a kind of roving ambassador for the Coordination. He has spent the past week in El Paso-- 7 days too long. So when Nina suggests he hie himself to Sacramento, he is happy for the change of venue. He will ask the governor there what it would take for CA to rejoin the Union.

The New York-New England Compact sign a free trade deal with Canada, after forcibly replacing the Border Patrol with their own state troopers. The new Secretary of War orders his army to invade New York. The Canadians are way ahead of DOW, though, and, at the invite of the Compact governors, send 70,000 first-line NATO troops to reinforce the Compact forces at the PA border. The Secretary calls in the Air Force to blow up the traitors. "See how long they can stand thermobarics on Boston and Manhattan," he says. "I dunno," Marshall Mumphrey says. "A lot of the guys, they don't like this idea." The first strike takes out Fort Knox, nowhere near the target zone, leaving the federal gold supply a million-ton puddle, which thereupon seeps into the limestone caverns below. The pilots land safely at Ethan Allen field by Lake Champlain.

The Department of War can no longer supply their Arctic bases, and withdraw the troops from Greenland just ahead of the Danish Expeditionary Force.

No one has seen the Alain AI for weeks. Perhaps the war so disrupted its distributed network that the AI lost its cohesion. Perhaps it has merged with its Chinese cousins. Various national and state governments feast on what's left of Alain the Trillionaire's corporate empire-- many pockets of void and vacuum, here and there a vein of gold.

A cleaning crew discovers the meat Alain in a warehouse for busted robots. They are there to fix up the place before it goes up for bid to a Saudi consortium. Most of the previous staff left months ago, but the cleaners discover the dried-up remains of a couple forklift operators. Not a mark on them; probably the flu got them.

Abandoned in his windowless cell, Alain has been reduced to eating his belt and shoestrings, thoughtfully left to him by his original captors for quite a different purpose, of which he has not availed himself in all these months of darkness. Alain seems a little confused, and not sure who he is. The new crew, with no instructions as to this particular kind of mess, point Alain to the

road outside the gates. He can hitch a ride to the next town over, or he can walk; could be there by dark.

The Coordination promise to bring back the President as soon as is practicable.

In medieval Europe, when common folk were in great distress, they reassured one another that the Sleeping Emperor would arise and return and set the world aright. On the eve of the New Year, we look forward to

LIBERATION DAY 2027